

MEETING CONOR LOVETT

The origins of a collaboration between artists can sometimes be traced to a single encounter. Meeting Conor Lovett, principal actor of Gare St Lazare Theatre Company, was one of those occasions.

In May 1999 on my first visit to New York, I delayed a departure flight to Amsterdam in order to attend the solo performance of Samuel Beckett's novel 'Malloy' by an actor regarded as one of the greatest living performers of Beckett, at the Irish Arts Centre uptown. I had been walking the city for several weeks and been confronted by the poster everywhere I went. Setting out at 6.30pm for the 8pm start, I believed I'd be earlyish.

A mega traffic-jam, two abandoned cabs, and an epic run during a teeming thunderstorm saw me arrive at the venue one minute after the curtain went up and the actor possibly emerging. The cashier-gent was resolute when I asked for a ticket. Instructions from the stage manager stated that nobody be allowed entry once the actor went onstage! He repeated this bluntly despite my explanation that I'd come all the way from New Zealand and been caught in the storm — and could secrete myself into the darkened theatre unnoticed, at the back.

Defeated, I ordered a glass from the bar and retreated to an armchair in the deserted foyer ~~and~~ with a ballpoint-pen and poster the man provided, began a letter to my friend John Reynolds (another Beckett devotee) on the reverse side of it.

About forty-five minutes later, people started filing into the room and I became aware of being stared at suspiciously. Still wet from the drenching, I slipped out a side-exit into a dim alleyway and rolled a cigarette. As the match flared, a soft Irish voice behind me in the shadows asked, "can I have a light?" As the smoke drifted

he added, "were you in the downpour, yourself?"

I recounted my tragic attempt to see the show to this stranger. Introducing himself as the performer-just-come-offstage, he suggested we watch the second half of the evening event together in the front row. It was the première of the documentary film, 'Waiting for Beckett' and as we passed the counter in the foyer he asked the cashier to give me a copy of the VHS tape that was on sale.

I next saw Conor Lovett in another foyer - the Aotea Centre, Auckland in 2011 - twelve years later, after he had performed an adaptation of Beckett's, 'The End', and I gate-crashed the Irish ambassador's congratulatory huddle. It was my birthday afterall! The next day, Conor and his wife Judy Hegarty, the artistic director of Bare St Lazare Theatre Company, joined me to see a customised horse-float sculpture of mine called the 'Tanglers Cave' that had just been on display at Two Rooms Gallery.

Since then we have stayed at their home-base and underground rehearsal studio on many occasions in the village of Merricourt, just outside of Paris. In 2013, Conor appeared in a documentary film of my own called 'Mindspaces - the artist's studio', voicing many poetic texts that I have published in exhibition catalogues over the years. We sat alongside Conor and Judy for the french première in their living-room with a gathering of their close friends and neighbours. We all toasted to the God-of-Random-Encounters that night.

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