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Islands at war in a golf club



Left to right, Lisa Lambe, Niamh Daly and Noni Stapleton in *Lizzie Lavelle and the Vanishing of Emlyclough*. Photograph: Tom Swift

Photograph: The Irish Times

Performance Corporation's latest play transforms dunes in Belmullet into a radical performance space, writes **Rosita Boland**

The Erris peninsula in northwest Mayo leads like a causeway to its most remote area, known as the Mullet. The narrow road west from Crossmolina and Bangor Erris floats across the bog and the huge skies overhead are ever-changing complexities of light and shadow. It's a place where the landscape has power, a glorious starkness that defines the horizon and gets inside your head: a wild and rich emptiness that is truly elemental.

Several months ago, theatre company Performance Corporation came to the Mullet Gaeltacht for a week to start developing a new piece of the site-specific work which it specialises in. In the past, the company has performed in locations as diverse as the Cork docklands, parked cars near Dublin's Pigeon Houses, a university medical school in Edinburgh, and a Kenyan village.

"We brought down actors and designers for a developmental week," explains director Jo Mangan. "We went for walks, talked to local people and local historians, read books, visited the lighthouse at Blacksod, and tried to find out what would be possible to do. We knew we wanted to incorporate local stories and folklore into whatever we did." They talked to a range of people, including Vincent Sweeney, whose family had long kept the lighthouse at Blacksod; farmer Laurence Howard; Mary Ruane of the Ionad Deirbhile heritage centre at Aughleam; and Seamus Cafferty, chairman of Carne Golf Links. Among the books they read were Mayo's *Lost Islands*, the *Inishkeas*, by Brian Dornan, and Rita Nolan's exemplary piece of local history, *Within the Mullet*, described as "an invaluable source" by Performance Corporation's writer Tom Swift.

The story that inspired them most was that of the Inishkea Islands North and South, which lie to the west of the Mullet, separated only by the smallest of stretches of ocean. Now deserted, the islands were populated until the 1930s. Despite the fact - or perhaps because of it - that Inishkea North and Inishkea South were geographically so close to each other, there was a long-standing bitter rivalry between the two communities.

This culminated during the Civil War, when the two islands took opposing sides on the Treaty. The islanders gathered on either side of the narrow stretch of water that divided their islands and hurled stones and abuse across at each other.

It was this story which Swift has woven into his piece of physical theatre, Lizzie Lavelle and the Vanishing of Emlyclough, which focuses on two warring communities. The other local stories which inspired him were those about sand. "There is so much folklore in the area about sand," he says. "One man told me how because the dunes keep shifting, that if you build a fence in certain areas, that the sand will rise and rise and within a year, it will have risen over the posts and you no longer have a fence." Once Swift started thinking about how they could use sand in their show, which has a professional cast of seven and a community cast of eight, all sorts of possibilities presented themselves. "You can have playful images of sand, of childhood holidays and fun; you can have building sites; and then there are other images of sand, like quicksand, which covers you over if you stand still. Sand seemed an apt metaphor to use for the warring communities of Emlyclough North and Emlyclough South: they are paralysed by their war, and thus by standing so still they get covered and lost."

Once sand became a dominant visual theme, the company started looking for a suitable outdoor location to perform at. They found it in a beautiful natural amphitheatre in the dunes adjoining Carne Golf Links, a couple of miles out of Belmullet. As you leave the village of Belmullet and turn left to follow the road to Carne, you pass a large and noticeable sign. "No to Shell for community and environment," it declares. "Short-term jobs, long term industrial pollution." The sign has been over-sprayed in red graffiti with two stark words: "Up Shell." At the bottom of the sign are the words: "A community divided." The Rossport pipeline dispute has bitterly and publicly divided the people of this area, but Swift admits that he only retrospectively realised the parallel between the divisions in the fictional communities of his play, and the real and continuing divisions created locally by the pipeline controversy.

BY TOMORROW, WHEN the piece will be first performed, a line of flags and bunting will mark the short walk from the golf links car-park to the amphitheatre hidden in the dunes with its view out over the Inishkea Islands. "We'll have radios hanging off some of the posts along the way, with recordings of match commentary to give people the feeling and atmosphere of going to a match," explains Swift. To reflect the fact that the Mullet is a Gaeltacht area, a portion of the dialogue is in Irish.

Lizzie Lavelle and the Vanishing of Emlyclough is the love story of Michael Meenaghan (Paul Connaughton) and Lizzie Lavelle (Lisa Lambe) from the villages of Emlyclough North and South respectively. The two warring villages, situated on opposing sides of the dunes, are engaged in a never-ending ball game that neither side can win, and they try to stop the relationship between the couple. But as the narrator, Sandman (Eamonn Hunt), says: "Isn't true love like sand? It gets everywhere. And just when you think you have it all shook off, a few grains are hiding within in some cranny - itching and itching."

Site-specific shows always demand certain extra qualities from actors. For this show, the cast had to go through regular sessions of physical training over three weeks. They are all required to run up and down the dunes several times during the show's 75-

minute duration, and the challenge is to deliver their lines without sounding constantly out of breath.

"In a normal theatre, when you go on and off stage, you just exit," says Connaughton. "But here, every time you go off, you have to go up a mountain." It's not a mountain, of course, but when, like Connaughton, who probably has the most number of entrances and exits, you are frequently scrambling up and down the dunes, the performance must feel more like hill-walking at times than acting. "The training is definitely paying off now. If we hadn't done it, it would have been so much harder."

"The challenge is to negotiate the space safely, but not let the audience see that it's a challenge," says Niamh Daly, who plays two parts, and thus has to also cope with regular costume changes. "It's really not second nature to be running down a sandy, grassy dune without falling over or tripping."

"I feel like I'm five years old again, running down the dunes, but you have to be careful you don't get too carried away and run out of breath," says Lambe.

THEY ALL AGREE THAT projection in such an open space is a challenge, but if possible, unless the wind is very strong, they will try and avoid using radio microphones. It's not the prospect of rain that's worrying Jo Mangan, it's wind: "Rain would be much less of a problem than wind. High wind won't carry voices." With this in mind, she has positioned the actors and the action in as close a range as possible to the audience.

Wind would also be problematic for the use of their key prop: the ball used in the never-ending ball game, which is actually a large Swiss exercise ball.

While Mangan had originally hoped to bring professional sand sculptors to the location to make two partially buried villages, the idea had to be dropped when they realised the dune sand was too fine to hold a shape. Instead, they are building villages on site.

They're also putting in low benches as seating, which are partially dug into the sand, and will be leaving rugs around the amphitheatre, so that some of the audience can sit picnic-like on the ground. All around the top of the hollow will fly flags, one red and yellow, and the other blue and green for the different colours of Emlyclough North and South.

They'll also be giving out the kind of woollen twists sold at every GAA match in Emlyclough colours, so audience members can support one particular village and team.

If Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh is in the area, he might even be tempted to do a bit of the commentary.

Lizzie Lavelle and the Vanishing of Emlyclough runs tonight and tomorrow at 7pm, and Aug 3 and 4 at 6pm, at Carne Golf Links, Belmullet, Co Mayo. All proceeds are going to local charities RNLI, the Mayo/Roscommon Hospice, and Western Care. www.ctb.ie