

Pat Kiernan, Artistic Director of Corcadorca and former member of Youth Theatre Cork in conversation with Tom Creed

# 20 YEARS A-GROWING

Above: Corcadorca, Pre-production *Disco Pigs*,  
Photo: Martin Healy.

**TC:** We might just start by talking a little bit about how you started working in the theatre in the first place.

**PK:** I had no plan to work in theatre. I didn't come from a theatre family or circle. The first play that I saw was Brendan Behan's *Borstal Boy* in 1990 in Dublin. I went to see it is because I was reading Brendan Behan at the time and I was curious to see this being staged. Brendan Behan had died and it allowed me a chance to see something by him. So, I went into the Gaiety in Dublin, with no expectations, and the manner in which it was done blew me away. I don't know what I would feel about it now, but at the time I just could not believe how brilliant it was, and what an experience it was for me. So, after that I was reading a lot, and I was into film, and I thought I wanted to be an actor. I remember seeing a poster for Youth Theatre Cork, which was run by Stephen Daunt and was based in Ashton School: "Are you interested in acting? Do you want join? If you're between 16 and 23, come to..." I was 23 at the time, so I was just on the edge of the age group. Suddenly I found myself going out there with people who were 16 years of age, who were experienced, and I had none. I did a play with them called, *The Insect Play* by the Capek brothers, and I was an ant in it... and that was my in, basically.

**TC:** Fantastic. And what happened after that?

**PK:** The graduation at the time, actually, was through Dramat. At the time it was in the old Granary, and because there was no training, and it was removed from the campus to a greater degree than it is now... like, we had the keys of the

place. Myself and Conor Lovett, who started Corcadorca, had done youth theatre shows, and I remember Eoin O'Shea cast us in a play, *Fanshen* by David Hare, so we were in the Dramat loop then, and we were in a position where we had a venue, and we could keep doing stuff. The people in there from UCC, even though they were students were doing little else. We were unemployed. You could be acting in a play one week, stage managing, lighting. Then I directed a production of *Entertaining Mr Sloane* for Dramat, and I won an award at ISDA for it, but it came out that I wasn't in UCC, so we had a bit of a rigmarole about that and we could not remain in the old Granary or as part of Dramat.

**TC:** And so then, with Corcadorca, what happened next?

**PK:** Well, what happened was that Conor and I just wanted to continue working in that way, so the logical thing was to start a company. Judy, Conor's wife, came up with the name Corcadorca. There was no policy. There was no plan, other than to keep making work, and with the same people that we had been working with already in Dramat.

The next leap was we got FÁS funding for schemes, and there was a bunch of us who were in the position that we could make work regularly. We were all in our early twenties. We were in the Triskel for two years, devising shows, and they were all terrible, but it allowed us to just find our way without text, to begin to try to say stuff and to make work.

After that we got Project Funding from the Arts Council to do a production of *Greek* by Steven Berkoff, and at that

stage, Enda [Walsh] had jumped on board with us – he was working with Graffiti at the time as an actor. So, he was cast in that play and it was the first time that we went back to a play having spent time without text. And having that kind of order restored to us also allowed us to make the theatre of it, with the order of a text and narrative, and that went very well. At the same time, there was a bunch of us who would meet for coffee regularly... we all used to read a lot, and I remember Alan O'Leary, who was designing at the time, read somewhere about making theatre in places that weren't theatres, so that was the next thing that we began to think about and do then.

**TC:** And what were the first productions that you did 'site-specific'?

**PK:** We did a production of *Owl*, which was a devised play, in City Hall, where we made a kind of 'in the round' venue there. After that was a version of *Christmas Carol* by Enda – a very loose adaptation of it – in Cork City Jail. Then it was *Clockwork Orange* in Sir Henry's, which was where we found our feet a little bit, I felt. We were more confident, I guess.

**TC:** And, of course, one of the experiences that I had that set me on the path of thinking that it would be possible to have a career in theatre was seeing the first production of *Disco Pigs*. Can you talk a bit about how you started working more with writing and talk a bit about the process by which you created *Disco Pigs*?

**PK:** At the time, in the national context, there was a lot of new writing happening – that was the currency of theatre at the time. In the Triskel, every about six or eight weeks, we'd have a thing called *Inside Out*, where everybody had the opportunity to do a five or ten-minute piece for a general public, and it was free to come and see it.

Enda was always going to write, and we spent a lot of time working with the actors – we had a company on the FÁS scheme. We spent quite a lot of time just looking at stuff.

But Enda wanted to write a show that we could tour, and bring outside of Cork. So, that was the first thing, then the text arrived, and reading it was extraordinary, really. But the way in which we were working at the time, we would never have thought other than, "How do we do this?" Eileen Walsh was a very obvious candidate for the role of Runt, having seen her in *Danti-Dan*, Gina Moxley's play with Rough Magic. We were trying to think of a guy for it, and I had taught Cillian [Murphy] in school, and he wanted to do something with Corcadorca because he had been influenced greatly by *Clockwork Orange*. I said to Enda, "There's this guy. I think he's good..." Anyway, the two of them gelled together. We workshopped for a while, then left it for six months, and then we rehearsed it, and I was only saying to Cillian last week- I remember we did a run of it in the studio in the Granary about a week before we opened, and I remember saying to Enda, "I don't think we're going to get

this much better, really." And that was the nature of it – it just needed to be worked, and it was another stage in the company's development.

**TC:** One of the things that I associate with your work, over more than a decade of watching it, is the sort of very special experiences that you create for audiences, be it that really compressed thing that was *Disco Pigs* in the theatre, or the really big site-specific shows that I grew up seeing. For me, the first one was *Phaedra's Love*, which was my first experience of Sarah Kane's work, and then the really big work – the Shakespeare's, and the projects with Cork 2005 as well. Could you talk to me about how that started becoming the focus of the company's work?

**PK:** Well, I suppose that after we did *Disco Pigs*, and after Edinburgh, we were in many different continents and regularly touring, but it didn't allow us as a company, because the company was so small, we could just about manage the tour. We couldn't do anything else. And I remember that with *Phaedra's Love* we found it really difficult to get audiences for it. Despite the fact that we were now lauded in Berlin and Melbourne and Toronto and whatever, because we'd been out of the city for so long, interest had waned in us as a company. And for me, I suppose, the biggest thing that I remembered at that time was doing *A Clockwork Orange* in Sir Henry's – and I'll never forget, even early in the run, the people trying

to get in, and a bit of a fight went on for a while, because I felt that Cork was more important for us than anywhere else, as a company registered in the city. We had built new audiences through this kind of, event theatre – site-specific theatre... it was a younger audience. And I had always maintained that the thing was for me, as somebody who hadn't come from a theatre background – I had an impression of theatre...this chocolate box image of dressing up and going to the Opera House- middle-aged, middle-class. And I also had the passion and interest in that kind of rock 'n' roll thing of, "I just want people to feel cool!" And that when [theatre] was good it could be as good if not better than any of the best gigs I'd ever been to.

When we did *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Fitzgerald's Park, people were climbing over the side gate to get in, and I was going: "That's f\*\*king brilliant, like." I love the idea of the experience and the event, married to the medium.

**TC:** And of course, one of the very important aspects of those shows was working with community casts, and that's something that you've been doing for more than ten years. How did that come about first, and can you talk about that experience a bit?

**PK:** I suppose, the idea came out of necessity – producing on this scale we needed more bodies. And then, outside of necessity, I've always found that it's an unbelievable leveller for everybody in the rehearsal room, because I do believe that anybody can do it. Once it's considered and gone through properly, anyone can go through that process.



Above: Corcadorca, *The Tempest*. Photo: Michael McSweeney / Provision.  
 Below left: Corcadorca, *The Hairy Ape*. Photo: Michael McSweeney / Provision.  
 Below right: Corcadorca, *medEia*. Photo: Michael McSweeney / Provision.



As a company in the city, I want to be recognised by everybody in the city, not just the theatre community. People who are working in the tax office in the afternoon and in the morning come with this enormous enthusiasm to do this thing. It filters out as well to the general public and to the audience that this is going on – that it's approachable, that you can go and see it. It's not this alien culture; it's very tangible. It begins to bring the company into the community as well.

**TC:** You can certainly feel that. Now, the company's been around for 20 years. A number of events have been happening this year to mark that, but one of the things that is most striking and important is the fact that you're back at Triskel, where things kicked off 20 years ago, and I'd be really interested to hear a bit about what the plan is there, and what the next phase of work is going to be.

**PK:** I have felt for a long time that the theatre community is very fractured in the city. I do believe that there are quite a few people who are actually committed to making work in the city, but it's very much in isolation. For us, as a company, it has become apparent that it makes sense to take time making work, so we have projects that we're working on that may not see the light of day for two or three years. So, to have a place that we can do that, but also that the general theatre community can do it as well. It means that we're all in contact with each other, because what happens on a Friday is that we all go to the showings of what's on.

What's really important is that it's not a Corcadorca place, really, it's a theatre development centre – so that we're not in any way artistically influencing anybody in there.

**TC:** It feels like an exciting time for the theatre in the city. Do you think there's anything still that Cork needs?

**PK:** Money, I guess, which is always the case... to allow the people who are here to have some access to a little more money in order to be able to do what they're doing already. And in terms of managing the Triskel space, there's great support from local people, local artists, in making sure that that will happen, because we couldn't do that by ourselves. But I think that that will only last for a certain period of time, until these people will need to be funded as well, or else the same thing will happen again. These people will leave and go to find work elsewhere, and that means that there's a void again – the cycle continues.

**TC:** There is excitement about your upcoming production, *Request Programme*, which continues the tradition of site-specific work, but on a much smaller scale, and brings back one of your most exciting collaborators over the years, Eileen Walsh. Are there other plans afoot for the company over the next little while?

**PK:** Well, we're going to do a production of *A Winter's Tale* in Cork Opera House in October, so we're working on that. It's really interesting to be going into a theatre again – it's the most unusual site I've been in, in a long time! With *Request Programme*, what's great for me is that I have, for the last while, been working on a much larger scale, but with this, it's the subtleties, like film almost, with a very small audience, so it's a big challenge and a very exciting one. We're looking at another Shakespeare as well, and Carmel Winters' new play. We're looking at working with Ray Scannell as well, so it is about trying to keep the momentum going of work in development, and what we do is look at these things, so that we can decide two years ahead about what we're going to do.

**TC:** Fantastic. It all sounds very exciting, and it sounds like an exciting time to be in Cork, and it sounds like Corcadorca are really at the heart of it.

*Tom Creed is a theatre and opera director, and has recently moved back to Cork to become Director of Cork Midsummer Festival.*