

**MALTHOUSE
PROMPT**

MILO'S WAKE



MARGERY FORDE & MICHAEL FORDE

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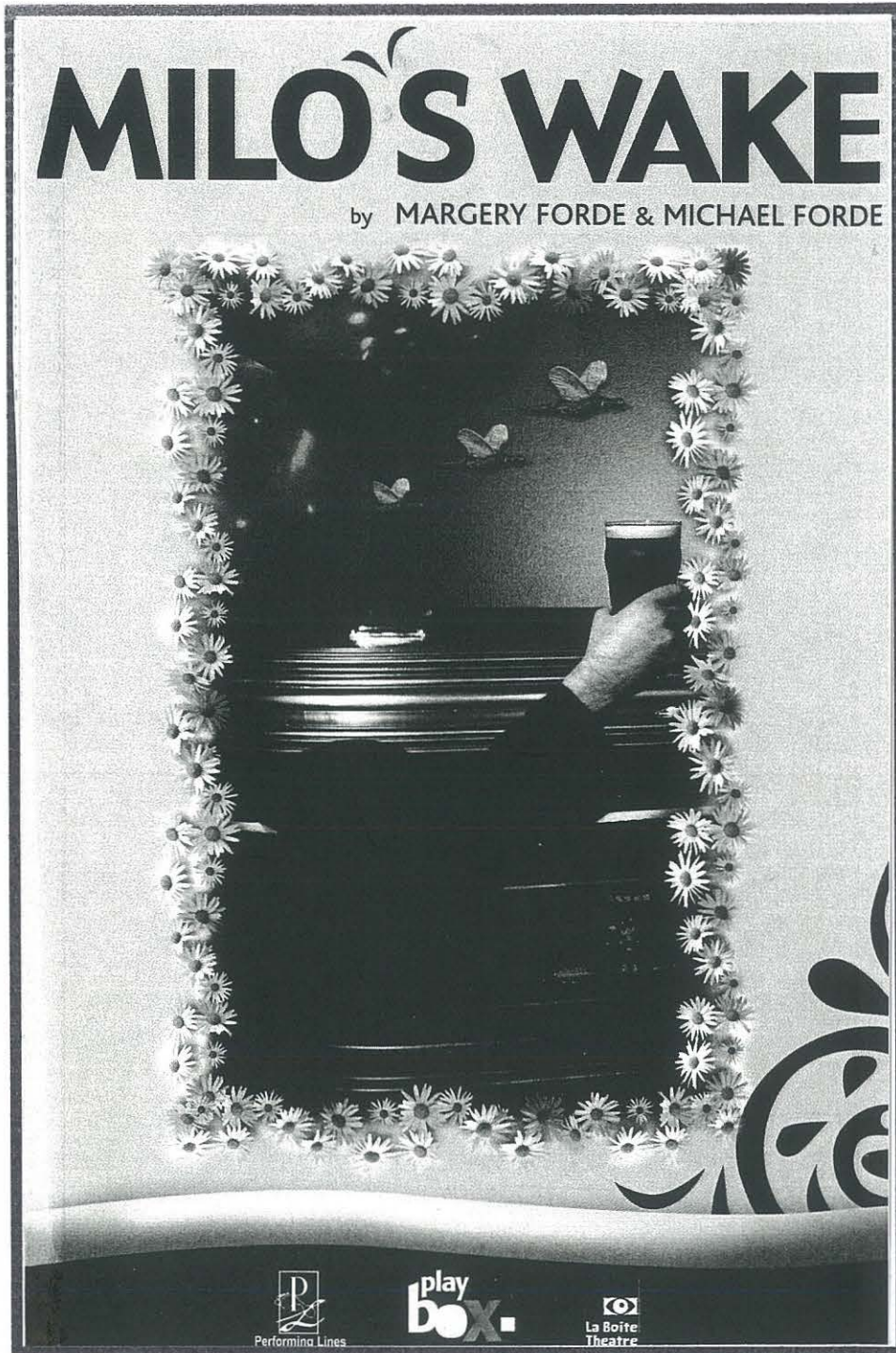
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MILO'S WAKE

by MARGERY FORDE & MICHAEL FORDE




Performing Lines

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La Boite
Theatre

BACKGROUND NOTES

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'MILO'S WAKE'

by Margery Forde & Michael Forde

BACKGROUND NOTES

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INTERVIEW WITH MARGERY FORDE AND MICHAEL FORDE - PLAYWRIGHTS FOR 'MILO'S WAKE'

What was the initial inspiration for writing "Milo's Wake"?

The initial inspiration was simply an idea – a man holds his own wake. Why? We wanted to find out where that idea would lead us. Also, we wanted to write a play which would be an “event”, a play with no fourth wall, where the actors could talk and interact directly with the audience. We were very excited about having the audience participate at the wake in a very real way. To create this event we wanted to use the migrant experience, particularly the Irish migrant experience as this was our own.

At the outset we also knew music would be a vital part of the play as music is at the heart of an Irish wake. We spent a great deal of time thinking about how Irish music (both traditional and contemporary) could be used to support the play by driving the narrative, modifying the mood and underlining themes.

So, in a nutshell, we had the idea of a man, an Irish migrant who has been here for many years, holding a wake for himself ... a wake in which the audience are enrolled as family and friends who have been invited.

"Milo's Wake" creates a very vivid portrayal of an Irish/Australian Family. Did writing the play involve any research or did you rely mainly on your own memories and experiences

In the past we have used interviews and intensive research to write our plays, and for Milo's Wake we did research the historical Irish experience in Australia very deeply. However, the story we wanted to tell was not an account of Irish-Australian shared history, interesting though this story is, but a personal story of a migrant family – our own. As such the “Irish-ness” in the play is really only a reflection of our own background.

To write this play we did strip mine our own family. Michael came to Australia when he was thirteen dragged here ‘in the wake’ of his Irish parents. In the play many of the incidents described are based on real events that happened to Mike's family in Brisbane. It's important, though, to say that the story is a fiction and the characters are not real people. For example, Michael's father, Tom Forde, while sharing Milo's migrant experiences, his storytelling abilities, sometimes acerbic wit and humour, shares none of his deep anger, grief and spiritual angst.

At what point in the writing process did you decide to involve the music and the audience participation in the play?

Right at the very beginning. The idea of writing “an event”, an Irish wake, with music and the audience in attendance as the friends and mourners was part of the initial inspiration for the piece. (See question one for more on this)

Can you talk about the role of the music/songs in the play?

The music and the musicians have a number of functions. We believe that the music allows the play to be more accessible to the audience, simply because of the shared enjoyment of listening and experiencing.

The music is also used to accentuate the mood and tempo of the play at any particular time, from celebration to regret to madness. The songs very often reflect on the themes of the play, and the attitudes of the characters. Very often Milo uses the music as a weapon to score off another character or to underline a point he is making.

The two Irish musicians, the Wren Boys, also act as a kind of Greek chorus for Milo. They are his mates and he turns to them for support and solace at various times throughout the play.

Did you have clear ideas about how the set/stage space should work in the play when writing it?

The play was the result of a commission from La Boite Theatre in Brisbane. This is one of the few theatres in Australia which is designed as a theatre in the round, with the audience on all four sides of the stage. It's a wonderful place to experience a play because of the close proximity of the audience and the actors.

We wanted to write a play which would take advantage of this space, so very early on we decided that the play should happen in a public space, such as a pub. We're interested in the idea of the intensely private happening in a public space. We decided that the events of the wake should take place in one of those ubiquitous Irish pubs in Brisbane. This could be Milo's watering hole - his refuge from his family and his underlying troubles. Yes, we had a very clear image of the pub while writing it, and conferred often during the writing process with the designer, Noeline Hill. Noeline gave us some wonderful ideas about the set which could then be included in the play.

Making theatre is a team effort and we have a strong belief that the writer should confer frequently with others who are involved in the production - directors, designers, including lighting designers, actors, musicians, other writers, stage management and other interested parties. Plays are not written in isolation. They are the blueprint for a hopefully living, breathing three dimensional event involving a whole barrage of people. Rather than letting these talented people just 'interpret' your work, why not let them influence it during its development? Of course you don't want a play written by committee, that would be disastrous, but if you can glean ideas and thoughts from others which can only enrich the final production - why not do so?

Were you involved at all in the rehearsal process?

Michael was working on another theatre project while the rehearsals were going on and so could not be a part of that process. Margery was most definitely involved. Margery attended just about every rehearsal and relished rewriting the script during this time - especially in the first couple of weeks. Very often she would come back from a day's rehearsal and spend the night re-writing a scene for the next day's work. There is a legend - untrue but reported in a Brisbane paper - that in a writing daze she came in to rehearsals one morning still dressed in her pajamas. (It did almost come to that, but not quite!)

Were there any particular themes that you were wanting to highlight in the play?

In a strange way we allowed the themes to emerge from the constant question that we kept asking and re-asking ourselves. "Why is this man, Milo, holding a Wake for himself?"

We started off with the easy answers...

To have a party. Why?

To get a kind word from his family and friends. Why?... and so on.

Finally we found that the answers led us to further questions about the nature of death, grief and existence. So the final theme, under the themes of migration and family relationships and history, led to Milo questioning the very meaning or meaninglessness of existence.

"Milo's Wake" contains moments of great humour and great sadness. Can you talk about the importance of these elements in the play?

There is a tradition in Irish theatre of the tragi-comedy. You can see this in plays such as "Juno and the Paycock" by O'Casey and even "Waiting For Godot" by Beckett. It is evident in many modern Irish writers as well... this use of humour to cover and somehow at the same time accentuate the basic sadness of existence. It may be an Irish cultural trait... to laugh and joke in the face of the sadness and sometimes the perceived meaninglessness of existence.

In our own family, especially Michael's family, there is this ability to turn on a sixpence, to go from "negative" emotions such as anger or deep sadness to story telling and laughter in an instant. We felt this had to be part of the play, so there are great extremes of emotion and these can happen very quickly. Out of laughter can come danger. Out of anger can come madness. We have an image that we like to use for Milo's Wake. A glass of Guinness... light and frothy on the top but underneath is the dark.

It is quite unusual in contemporary theatre to see plays taking place in the one place in 'real time'. Was this a deliberate choice for the structure and style of your play?

Yes, this was a deliberate choice for the play. The advantage of a play that takes place in real time is that there is an intensity that grows over time. The characters are trapped on the stage in the world of the play and the audience, hopefully, live and share this time with them. It does demand a certain commitment and investment from the audience, but we believed that they are repaid in good measure by the enjoyment and empathy they feel with the characters.

And yes, many modern plays are written in short almost filmic scenes. This technique can be most effective as long as it's used to support the story and themes. If it's used because the writer thinks that modern audiences are not capable of long term concentration then they need to rethink their reasons for using that technique. Having said that, it is very difficult to write a "real time" play because it can lead to an incredible amount of time being spent on back story. That's why we chose the conceit of a wake as the basis of the play. This allows the audience to be filled in quite logically as they are in fact another member of the cast.

How do you see the role of playwrights in society?

There are as many answers to this question as there are playwrights, we guess. We can only say why we write plays in relation to our society. People make sense of their experiences through hearing their own stories. We are interested in unearthing the true stories of real people and then reflecting them back. We love the shock of recognition in the audience that this is "truth" ... even if that truth is uncomfortable or unpalatable.

Unlike many playwrights, we tend to keep our own views and beliefs as much as we can out of the way of our characters. We'll give you an example. Margery wrote a play called X-Stacey which was about the Rave scene in Brisbane and the use of drugs within this scene. Rather than taking a judgmental view of this, she went into the scene herself, talking to DJ's, ravers, parents, Government agencies and so on. Again the stories and many of the words used in the play were the quotes from people who lived it. Margery, as much as possible let the story speak for itself. The play received some criticism for being too soft on the drugs issue - mostly from people who were stamping their own prejudices on the topic and not we may say from the government bodies such as "Rave Safe" who were truly involved in the issues. Most gratifyingly, it was universally acclaimed by young people as being a true representation of their lives.

We think that our job as playwrights is to reflect back society to itself - not only for criticism but also for affirmation and celebration. The very act of going to the theatre calls for a community to come together. At the theatre we want to tell the stories of the tribe because we believe that this is how we can better understand ourselves and each other.

Margery Forde and Michael Forde
2002

INTERVIEW WITH Jim Vilé - DIRECTOR OF ORIGINAL PRODUCTION OF 'MILO'S WAKE'

As a director, what were your first responses upon reading the script of 'Milo's Wake'?

I have been fortunate in having worked on four of Margery and Michael Forde's plays over the years and so I knew what I was in for: emotional strength, a great sense of language and a sound dramatic structure. And this was before the script had been written. I was also aware of the brief Sue Rider, the then director of La Boite (Brisbane-based Theatre Company), the commissioning company, had developed. Sue wanted a play which had the same immediacy as *Emma Celebrazione!* by Graham Pitts (which I had directed for La Boite two years running) with dynamic audience involvement, music and song and recognisable rituals and settings. So whereas the audience in *Emma* are the wedding guests, in *Milo's Wake* they would be guests at the wake.

I love that sort of 'event' theatre and so when I was engaged to direct the play, even before the script was even created, I was looking forward to it. To also be asked to work on the script as a dramaturg was a real treat.

I firmly believe that plays best evolve when a conspiracy of equals, who know and respect each others gifts, are brought together to develop the work.

When the task of creative development was completed I knew that we had a beautiful play, with all sorts of strengths, suggesting all sorts of promises. Of course a play written by Margery is never complete, for Margery at least. As director, towards the end of rehearsals, I had to stop rewrites so the actors could actually get on with the job of developing their journey for opening night.

Could you talk about your involvement as dramaturg to the play?

Six months before *Milo* went into production, I was able to lead a week-long creative development workshop with a full cast of specially selected actors (some of whom were subsequently cast in the play) and a musician.

We worked on what was the fourth draft and as the week unfolded we began to believe that we were actually working on a script with enormous promise. The two difficult areas of the script were:

- To somehow link all the fabulous stories Margery had researched and written to the emotional backbone of the play. I believe the writers overcame the danger of individual anecdotes being included because they were so funny. Too good to miss because they made us laugh or cry, or because they were **so** 'Irish'.

- To find a way of introducing the girl friend into the story and to give that character weight, so she could carry the point of view of the outsider, the more objective observer. I felt that of all the wonderful "break-throughs" we made, tying in the character of Brooke was/is perhaps not as complete as we all hoped it would have been.

The audience plays a very important role in 'Milo's Wake'. How does this affect the work in the rehearsal room?

I have had some experience in acting in and directing plays, which shift from 'fourth wall' conventional realism to talking directly to the audience. *Milo* treads a fascinating and dangerous line in that the audience is invited to become the fifth actor, able to influence the energy of the play in a way not usual in other more 'realistic' forms. Whereas in most plays, the audience is asked to suspend their disbelief, in a play like *Milo* they are asked to do so in an active way. The play suffers if the audience does not accept the invitation to be a member at the wake...the fifth actor.

It is difficult to create the conditions of the audience/actors interaction in a rehearsal room. Early on we carefully identified those sections which were meant to be addressed directly to the audience and those which were interior. As the actors became more familiar and bolder with the text, they found ways of moving between interior and exterior in a fluent and telling way.

In blocking the action I made sure that actors focused outwards, consciously and conscientiously addressing a make-believe audience during rehearsals.

Towards the end of rehearsals, we were able to bring some people as surrogate audiences into the rehearsal room to familiarise the actors with direct address and to test whether it actually worked. This strategy was supported by a number of previews before opening night.

How does it impact on individual performances?

Performance changed and developed from previews to opening night and throughout the season. All four actors grew in confidence using the two styles of acting. The audience and their energy initially propelled the actor playing the central character of Milo (the most overt and most interior character in the play) to such an extent that he was not in complete control. It took three or four performances for everybody to learn how they could control and use the audience. On good nights the performances were buoyed up by the interaction with the audience. On slow nights the actors had to work much harder to make the play work.

Were there any particular themes or ideas you were trying to highlight in your production?

I was particularly interested in the migrant experience as shown through the relationship within the family; the vulnerability of the central character made manifest in his relationship with both his sons.

How would you describe the style of your production of 'Milo's Wake'?

Somewhere between cabaret/revue and 'realism', somewhere between 'stand-up' and tragedy. I don't have a word for the style of production, it is something that grew out of the demands of the text, as I believe all 'style' should.

Music is very much a part of 'Milo's Wake'.

(a) What role do you see it as having within the production?

I find it hard to imagine this play, although set in Australia, without music. It is Irish/Australian. The music reflects on the action; look at the way *Steal Away* underscores the pain between Milo and Maura. The songs help to establish character; look at Milo's choice of Teddy Bear. Music provides moments of repose and music drives the action. The reason we discover that there is an other son, whose death lies at the centre of the tragedy, is through Brooke's rendition of that boy's favourite song. It opens up the wound and drives the action forward.

(b) How did you go about incorporating the musicians into both the rehearsal and performance process?

One of the musicians had been involved in the creative development process and helped the playwright with song selection. Once both singers had learned their songs they were brought into the rehearsal process and were encouraged to develop a relationship with the characters and discover their own reactions to what was happening within the story.

Could you talk about your involvement in the design process?

As part of the dramaturgical work the playwrights and I had decided that the action of the play should be set in an Irish pub. The designer and I had the 'dreadful' task of visiting the Irish pubs around town, from which we together drew up the essentials needed to create the feeling of an Irish pub but which would also serve the needs of the play. Further more we researched through books and interviews behaviour in Irish pubs and the ritualistic elements of an Irish Wake.

Was 'Milo's Wake' a collaborative process for you and the rest of the creative team?

Yes! With a new play such as *Milo's Wake* everyone in the play is on a voyage of discovery. The lighting designer, for instance, helped solve the problem of intimacy which is so characteristic of Irish pubs. After many discussions we settled on low hanging lights with light shades over the audience to give the sense of a lowered ceiling.

The playwright was hardly out of the rehearsal room from beginning to end.

The original poster grew out of a discussion with the actor playing Milo, the PR person, the graphic designer and me.

And supporting all this was the work of the Artistic Director Sue Rider. She attended rehearsals, gave notes, helped Margery with the final script and generally provided the council and confidence which carried us forward to a most successful season.

Jim Vilé
2002

INTERVIEW WITH ANDREW BUCHANAN - TOUR DIRECTOR OF 'MILO'S WAKE'

Andrew, as a director, how did you initially respond to the script of 'Milo's Wake'?

I was startled. The play I saw originally at La Boite Theatre Company (Brisbane), and the play on paper, were significantly different. The play on stage was an amazing vehicle for the actor playing Milo. I felt the other characters in the play could be further explored in order to deepen the experience for both the audience and the actors.

The play on paper surprised me! It was incredibly rich, in terms of the family relationships. Complex - steeped in family 'history'. Each player had such a strong agenda - each desperately wanted something significant. I found this incredibly engaging. It was from here that we began to inquire in subsequent productions.

How faithful to the original production is the current touring production of the play? What choices did you make in this regard?

We re-examined everything. From the moment before the play starts, to it's conclusion. The internal journey for each character is different - therefore each player navigates the space differently, relationships are richer. There were several terrific moments that harkened back to the first show. Yet I felt there was scope to make further discoveries during the rehearsal process and explore other possibilities. This became a springboard for our rehearsals and what makes this production different is the greater integration of the other characters in the family.

What do you see as being the major themes that the play explores?

A major theme is the tyranny that can exist in families; particularly looking at the father's role. Other important themes include: dealing with grief, the migrant experience and an individual's search for identity and validity.

As a touring director, would you talk about the potential challenges of mounting a production that is 'on the road'.

My strong desire was to create an opportunity for the actors whereby their journey on stage was rich, clear and compelling. If each moment were as fully realised as possible; their journey on stage (153 times) being seamless, fluid, each moment easily accumulating into the next; before you knew it the play would be over! It's when you sense a moment on stage being 'forced' due to a director's bad choice or an actor's slackness, or a scene unrealised;

that you are self aware - your work on stage becomes a labour attempting to make it all work. If the actors could trust and get selflessly 'involved' in their journeys - it would be satisfying for them on stage - no matter how long the tour.

Would you say that 'Milo's Wake' has a distinct style and, if so, how would you describe that style?

The relationship with the audience is central. I think this is peculiar to 'Milo's Wake'. The audience is Milo's dear guests. He needs them, and relates to them at nearly every occasion. Yet, there wasn't a playing style employed. There is no fourth wall being broken. The character/actor absolutely knows they're there - they've been invited and their allegiance and support is constantly sought and cultivated. Just like life!

Are there any aspects of the production that will be particular to the Playbox season?

On this tour we play in a 'thrust' configuration in Melbourne, changing into a proscenium configuration for later venues. At La Boite, it was performed in-the-round. This is quite a different playing dynamic. It's been encouraging experiencing the relationship between actor and audience thrive in large spaces (approximately 900) and intimate spaces.

For the performances at Playbox, we have adjusted the blocking to accommodate sight lines for the audience on the floor and in the gallery. To assist, the set is placed on a 400mm high stage - that's new!

Andrew Buchanan,
2002

INTERVIEW WITH NOELENE HILL

- DESIGNER OF 'MILO'S WAKE'

Noelene, as a designer, how did you initially respond to the script of 'Milo's Wake'?

Initially I discussed the play with the director, particularly in relation to the style of the production. I then set about researching the play, particularly in relation to Irish pubs in Australia, Irish Mythology and the Irish way of life. Themes were important in the design process as well.

The next step was to map out the general layout of the scenes, the movement on stage, and to address the mood and colour palette of the play. As a designer it is also important to analyse each of the characters, particularly in relation to costume design.

The play is quite prescriptive in relation to design elements and stage directions. Did this affect your role as a designer in any way?

I was very fortunate to be involved in the early development of the script so I had a reasonable input into the design elements and staging. My input helped to shape the final script.

The audience-actor relationship is very important in 'Milo's Wake'. Did this have any impact on the design elements?

Yes it did. The play is written so that the audience are the guests at the wake. To highlight this relationship, the writers, director and myself wanted to include some members of the audience in the actual play space. Consideration had to be given to placement of these audience seating booths to make them feel included while not detracting the focus from the actors.

Similarly, in what way did the inclusion of live music and musicians impact upon the design?

Provision had to be made to incorporate musical equipment into the bar space. Besides being interactive characters the musicians (The Wren Boys) also became an element of the stage design. In a way the musicians fulfilled a similar role to that of a Greek Chorus - commenting on the action through their music.

Were there any particular themes you were wishing to highlight in your design for the play?

In the utilization of the traditional atmosphere of the 'pub' I wanted to explore the theme of family relationships; how historical background, and events past and present impact on these relationships. I also wanted to highlight the

universality of these family relationships - how we can all relate to them on some level. The familiar warm atmosphere of the pub acts as a catalyst to express certain emotions.

How would you describe the 'style' of your design for 'Milo's Wake'?

I would describe it as *symbolic realism*. I used elements of style taken from various Irish pubs in order to create an atmosphere evocative of a pub environment and representational of the themes of the play. Design elements such as the floor design are taken from various illustrations in *The Book of Kells* [see resource notes]. The spiral on the bar and the leprechauns sitting on top of the bar and clock represent connection to the past which influence our lives and relationships.

The play is currently on national tour. Was taking the play on-the-road part of your initial design brief? If so, did the fact that the play was touring impact upon your design or, does the touring set differ from your original design?

No, the tour was not part of my initial design brief. The play was originally designed for La Boite Theatre (in Brisbane) and the space there is a theatre-in-the-round.

The touring set consists of the same elements and set pieces in a slightly different configuration, with the addition of four picture flats which frame the space. The original design spread out beyond the stage into the surrounding theatre space. There were swinging pub doors at the entrance to the theatre and the walls behind the audience were covered in framed prints, a common decorative theme in many Irish pubs. This helped bring the entire audience into the acting space. The foyer and interval bar at La Boite were also decorated with pub paraphernalia.

As a designer, were you involved in the rehearsal process?

Yes I was. I would attend rehearsals a couple of times a week in order to see the developing shape of the performance. It is important to be involved in the rehearsal process as the blocking and action can have an impact on design elements and costuming.

Noelene Hill
2002

FOCUS AND ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

CONTEXT AND THEMES

1. What is the role of a wake in Irish tradition?
What elements of Milo O'Connor's wake follow the tradition?
2. The writers thoroughly researched the history of Irish migration to Australia in order to write *Milo's Wake*.
What can you find out about Irish migration to Australia?
You could begin your research with the references on the resources page in these notes.
3. Some members of your class may have family members with Irish heritage.
By talking to them you could gather some oral histories about the experiences of coming from Ireland to Australia or stories they may have been told by their parents/grandparents.
4. What experiences does Milo describe in the play that he may have in common with other people migrating from Ireland or, indeed, from other countries in the world?
5. A major theme in *Milo's Wake* is family. What elements does Milo's family have in common with other families?
6. Margery Forde and Michael Forde mention the tradition of tragi-comedy in Irish theatre such as *Juno and the Paycock* by Sean O'Casey and *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett.
What do you think is meant by tragi-comedy?
What can you find out about:
 - Irish Theatre
 - Sean O'Casey
 - Samuel Beckett?
7. *Milo's Wake* is Milo O'Connor's story but the director of the touring production, Andrew Buchanan, talks about emphasising the journeys of all the characters, not just Milo's.
Select one of the other characters - Maura, Ned or Brooke - and discuss what journey they take throughout the play.

COMPARING THE SCRIPT WITH THE PLAY IN PERFORMANCE

1. The playwrights talk about wanting to write a play that is a 'living, breathing, three-dimensional event'.
How is the experience of seeing *Milo's Wake* in the theatre different to that of reading the play?
2. What roles do the music and the audience participation play in the *live* experience of the show?

STYLE

1. Read each interview carefully and pay particular attention to each of the artists' comments on the style of the play.
2. How would you define the following terms:
 - tragi-comedy
 - cabaret/review
 - realism

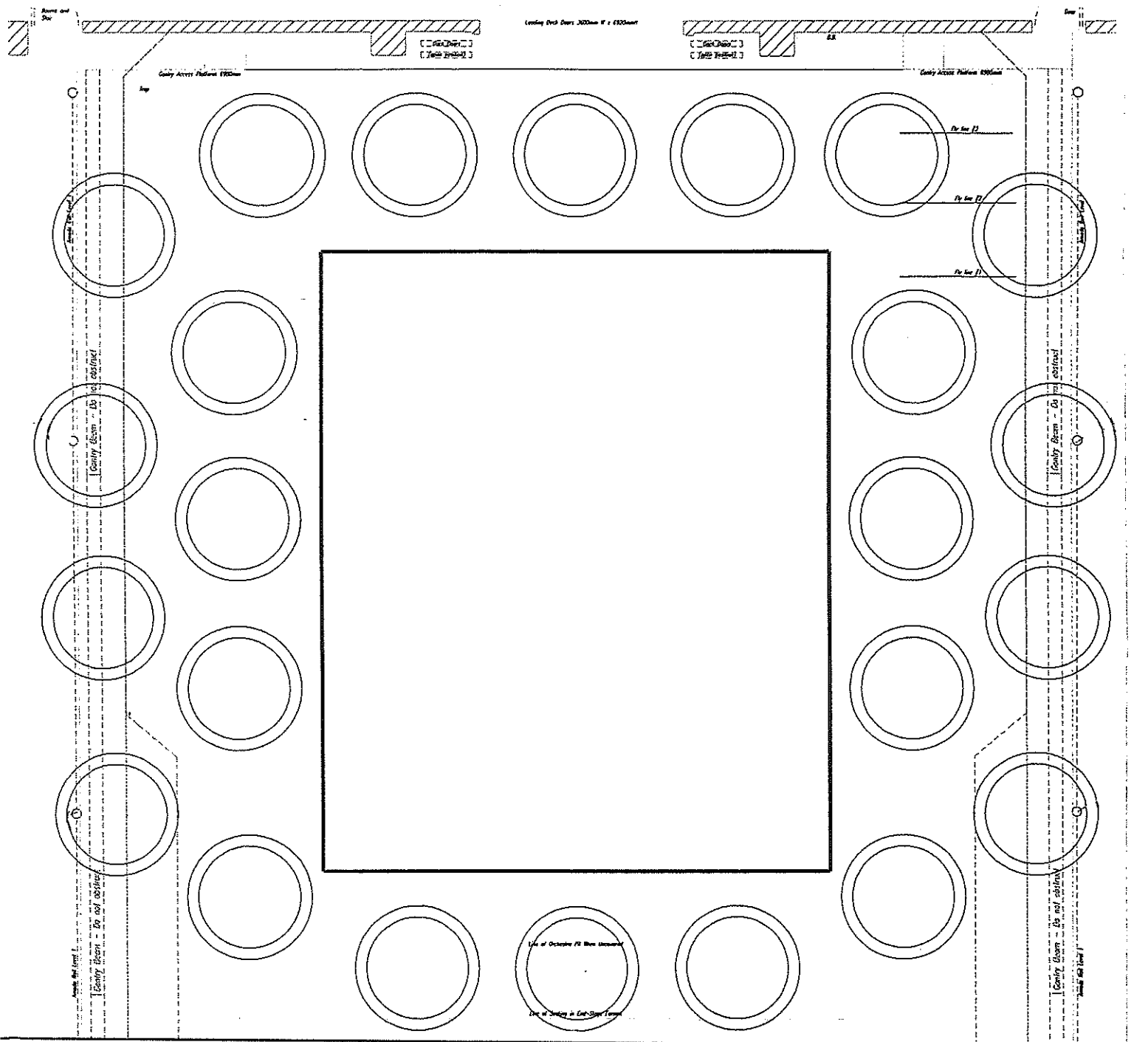
- stand-up
- tragedy
- symbolic realism

Which of these do you think best describes *Milo's Wake*?

3. The playwrights talk about *Milo's Wake* as a play "with no fourth wall".
What does this mean?
How did you find the experience as a "guest" at Milo O'Connor's wake?
4. Director, Jim Vilé, described the audience as the 'fifth actor' in the cast. What do you think he means by this?
5. The musicians are described by both the playwrights and the designer as a kind of "Greek Chorus" in *Milo's Wake*.
What role does the chorus play in traditional Greek Theatre?
How do the musicians play this role in *Milo's Wake*?

STAGECRAFT ELEMENTS

1. The playwrights talk about wanting to create a sense of 'the intensely private happening in a public space'.
How do the set design and lighting design both contribute to creating a sense of:
 - the intensely private
 - the public space?
2. Noelene Hill, the designer, describes addressing the 'mood and the colour palette of the play'.
 - What is the 'colour palette' in the design for *Milo's Wake*?
 - How does it influence the mood of the play?
3. The writers spent a great deal of time thinking about Irish music (traditional and contemporary) could be used to support the play by 'driving the narrative, modifying the mood and underlining themes'.
Can you think of examples of when the music:
 - drives the narrative
 - modifies the mood
 - underlines the themes of the play?
 What impact does the music have on you as an audience member?
4. The designer mentions Irish Mythology and The Book of Kells as influences in her design.
Irish Mythology:
 - research leprechauns in Irish Mythology (see resource list in these notes as a starting point)
 - how are they used in the design for *Milos' Wake*?
 - what might they represent symbolically in the play?
 The Book of Kells:
 - research The Book of Kells (see resources list in these notes as a starting point)
 - what evidence can you see of the influence of The Book of Kells in the set design?
5. The set for the original production of *Milo's Wake* at La Boite in Brisbane was in-the-round.
How do you think this would have affected the production for:
 - the actors
 - the audience?
6. Practical Exercise: See over the page for a practical design exercise on *Milo's Wake*



Design Brief for *Milo's Wake*

The above seating plan for *Milo's Wake* shows an in-the-round configuration. Imagine you are the Designer for the play.

- Draw your own floor plan for the set
- Carefully consider the impact of an in-the-round configuration on both the audience, actors and musicians
- Consider what set items and properties would be essential
- Try to incorporate symbolism into your set design - these choices may come from your research or your reading of the script

'Milo's Wake' - Resources & References

The following references may be helpful to your study of the play

The Wake

The plot of 'Milo's Wake' is based on the tradition of a wake.

A wake is a festive gathering around the body of a dead person prior to burial. Relatives, neighbours and friends gather to spend a night in drinking, singing, dancing and story-telling. The custom can be interpreted as a means of honouring the dead person by a last feast. It could also be seen as a way of confirming the continuity and vitality of life. Another reason for the presence of relatives and friends in the room of the dead person was possibly that the very presence of the living would frighten off evil spirits and allow the soul a passage to Heaven. (Adapted from The Oxford Companion to the History of the Irish and World Book Encyclopaedia).

General References - The Irish in Australia:

- Publication - O'Farrell, Patrick 1987 The Irish in Australia (University of NSW)
- Website - Irish History on the Web
<http://www.vms.utez.as.edu/~jdana/irehist.html>
A very diverse site with many links to immigration, celtic history and contemporary Irish communities
- Website - The Centre for Irish Studies
<http://www.sox.murdoch.edu.au/cfis/main.html>
Based at Murdoch University in Western Australia this is an excellent site for examining Australian-Irish heritage and setting the play in both a contemporary and historical context
- Publication - Val Noone (ed) *TÁIN - The Australian Irish Network* (magazine) Email: info@tain.net.au Website: www.tain.net.au

The Book of Kells

A copy of the Gospels written in Latin. The book is lavishly decorated with full page depictions of the Evangelists and their symbols. Its text is enlivened with drawings and decorated initials composed of human and animal figures, most of which carry symbolic resonances. The Book of Kells has attracted a great deal of scholarly disagreement over its date and origin. (adapted from The Oxford Companion to Irish History)

Further references to The Book of Kells:

- Web Site - The Book of Kells
<http://www.esotericart.com/fring/art/symbolic/BookKell/kells.htm>
This site has an overview of the Book of Kells and some beautiful pictures of the Book.
- Web Site - The University of British Columbia Library
<http://www.library.ubc.ca/finearts/KELLS.html>
The general site of the University which has some very useful information about the book as well as links to other sites/collections

Leprechauns

Irish fairy-folk, believed to be derived from the Irish god Lugh. Originally the Tuatha De Danaan (peoples of the goddess Dana) whom Lugh defended but who were then driven underground by another enemy and left to occupy hillocks and mounds. Legend has it that they slowly transformed into the mischievous fairy folk known as Leprechauns (adapted from World Mythology).

Further references to Leprechauns:

Website - Leprechauns & Ciaran

<http://members.tripod.com/~pg4anna/Leps.htm>

A rather 'cute' site that backgrounds the mythology surrounding the leprechaun, complete with dancing leprechauns.

Leprechauns can be found in most books about mythology or, more particularly, Irish and Celtic Mythology.

Toast with Milo

An immigrant who once shunned his Irishness now embraces it, writes LOUISE NUNN

WHEN Michael Forde arrived in Australia with his Irish immigrant parents, the first thing he aimed to perfect was the Aussie accent.

Being different was definitely not de rigueur among his age group, and the 13-year-old did everything he could to disguise his Irishness.

Forde eventually married, had a family of his own and embraced his past. Now he is the proud owner of an enormously rich heritage and an award-winning play about it.

Brisbane-based Forde and his wife Margery co-wrote *Milo's Wake*, which Playbox is presenting in association with Performing Lines. Forde also appears in the show as Milo, an Irish immigrant living in Australia who thinks he is dying.

Milo decides to hold his own wake. He is joined by his family, two musicians and, in an unusual twist, members of the audience who are invited to sit on stage during the performance.

Forde says audience members have been recruited for this purpose in different ways.

It will be a first-come, first-served affair with each show.

"We don't ask for great involvement from them — we don't ask them to improvise speeches or anything — but they are there for the entire performance as family members at the wake," he says.

"We treat the rest of the audience as members of the wake, too."

The Fordes wrote *Milo's Wake* in 1999 for Brisbane's La Boite Theatre. After a successful 2000 premiere season it won Queensland's Matilda Award, the New South Wales Premier's Literary Award for Best Play, and was nominated for an Australian Writers Guild Award.

Actor and director Sean Mee played Milo in the original production. When he was appointed La Boite's artistic director in 2000 he offered Forde the role in a Queensland regional tour and now the national tour, directed by Andrew Buchanan.

Milo's Wake is about the migrant experience as well as the specific Irish experience, Forde says. The family is fictional, but there is something of his own father in Milo.

"He's a fairly brutal wit and has very quick changes of mood, a wonderful character," he says. "Milo is probably a bit darker than Dad. He's a character who has had something fairly tragic and dark happen to him.

"It's an Irish thing . . . and an Australian thing, too. The way you cope with something dark or sad is to laugh a bit more, play a bit more music, drink a bit more Guinness and gather people around you."

MARGERY and Michael Forde share performing backgrounds and have been in the theatre almost all their working lives.

About 12 years ago they started writing and producing on a freelance basis.

"I look upon Margery as the real writer. She's obsessive about the writing and the rhythms of the words," Forde says.

"I like to look at the overall story, the plot and character and that sort of thing. Marg says I have the wider vision and that I keep her from losing the plot.

"But she puts in the polishing and polishing and polishing. That obsessive polishing writers do."

Milo's Wake, CUB Malthouse, Southbank, tomorrow-May 25. Tickets: \$30-\$40.50. Bookings: 9685 5111.



Black is beautiful: Michael Forde plays Milo O'Connor (top) in the play, *Milo's Wake* (above), which he co-wrote with his wife Margery.

Herald Sun, Tuesday, May 7, 2002

Funnily alive to family tensions

Theatre

Milo's Wake

By Margery Forde and Michael Forde. Director: Jim Vilé. La Boite, Brisbane.

THE Irish-Australian Milo O'Connor is part of a distinguished line of anti-heroic theatrical fathers. Like Willy Loman, he's a salesman whose best days are behind him. Like Max in Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*, he is a confused boaster spilling for a fight. And like Alf in Alan Seymour's *The One Day of the Year*, he is intimidated by young people with an education superior to his.

But most of all, Milo is desperate to hear a kind word spoken about him. That's why, in Margery Forde and Michael Forde's entertaining new play for La Boite, we witness the irascible Milo staging his own mock wake with the audience as the guests.

It is a risky premise, particularly since most of the dramatic interest lies in the narration of the back story. But with a well-paced script, a strong cast and sympathetic direction from Jim Vilé, the interest rarely flags.

Better-known as a director, Sean Mee plays Milo with ferocious intensity, rising from his coffin at the opening and constantly engaging the audience in his hilarious patter. As his long-suffering wife Maura, Sue Dwyer makes a welcome return to her home town. And with the musical duo The Wren Boys (David Megarrity and Gary Nunn) located within the action on stage, Milo acts as host to a night of Irish song and blarney, all of it masking a terrible, inexpressible grief.

When son Ned (La Boite favourite Paul Denny in another star turn) reluctantly arrives at his father's wake, he brings with him his copywriting girlfriend Brooke, a problematic, part-spectator role played with tremendous charm by newcomer Jacki Mison. In dramatic terms their relationship remains unexplored and undeveloped as the family history unfolds. In this it is a casualty of the one-man show quality that Milo brings to the play.

Planning to leave the house and travel around in a campervan, Milo bequeaths the family house-cladding business to Ned, who in turn announces his marriage to Brooke. But then the unfortunate subject of the younger son, Aidan, who died a year earlier, is raised. And with it, Milo's wake is revealed to be not just the event on the stage, but the trail of destruction that the patriarch's unexpressed agony leaves in its path.

Set within an authentic-looking Irish pub designed by Noelene Hill, *Milo's Wake* offers a moving night in the theatre, with only an occasional stylistic tension between active and passive audience involvement arresting the flow of a production in which we genuinely care about the central character.

□ MARTIN BUZACOTT
Until September 9.