The Lyric's third act

Paul Larmour visits the new theatre, which he describes as a boon for the dramatic arts and the most exciting building in Belfast.

New theatre can be the most exciting building in any city. It can be the home of miracles and spontaneity and revelation and transformation, and building a new theatre - especially in times like these - is both an act of faith and a gesture of faith in your community.

Those were the words of the Ulster playwright Brian Friel in September 2005, read out at the unveiling of the threshold stone for the new Lyric theatre in Belfast, prefaced by the first act in the rebuilding scheme launched as one of Ireland's most successful and admirable cultural ventures.

Now that the building has been completed and officially opened, in May this year, after a protracted campaign, Friel's words can be seen to be prophetic. The Lyric Theatre is now, by far, the most exciting building in Belfast; the impressively substantial form it takes is almost instructive, considering the company's humble origins and sometimes difficult history, and the overall impact is not just confined to the new building's typological success in the architectural and theatrical worlds, but extends to a wider role as the latest icon for the "new" Belfast. It is a fitting after a tale of determined commitment that does honour to those who started the Lyric on its way over sixty years ago.

The Belfast Lyric Theatre was founded by Mary O'Malley with her husband Pierce O'Malley when they moved from Dublin to Belfast in 1951. Born in 1938 in Killarney, Co. Kerry, Mary O'Malley had developed an early passion for Irish theatre, with an experimental group in Dublin where she became a devotee of poetic drama and a champion of the work of W.B. Yeats in particular. She began to stage small private productions of Yeats's and others for friends and fellow enthusiasts in the drawing-room of her house in Lisburn Avenue in south Belfast. More space for these productions became available when the O'Malleys moved the next year to Derryholme Avenue not far away, where their group's first actual theatre with a small stage and seating for fifty people, was set up in the left of a converted stable block to the rear of the house. Their activities expanded and their reputation grew, until in 1965 the Lyric Players, by then integrated into a non-profit making charitable trust, were thriving enough to build a new purpose-designed theatre, opened in 1969 in Lisburn Avenue off Stranmillis Road, also in south Belfast (Fig 3).

Right from early on the group's activities extended to poetry recitals, lectures, art exhibitions, a crafts gallery and a music and drama school for children. Many of...
Northern Ireland's finest artists and writers as well as theatrical talents were to join forces with the O'Malleys. They included the poet Seamus Heaney and the painter P.B. Sharragh, while Liam Neeson and Clive Lawen were just two of the well-known actors developed and nurtured in the Lyric Fold.

Mary O'Malley retired in 1984, leaving Belfast for Wexford and died in April 2006, leaving behind a lasting legacy of ambition and commitment to professional theatre in Belfast. By then the old Lyric building was past its prime, and a move to replace it had already started.

In 2003 an international architectural competition was held for the design of a new theatre for the Lyric on the site. It was won by the Edinburgh architects O'Donnell + Tuomey, but construction had to wait for seven years due to the financial crisis.

RIGHT FROM THE START, O'DONNELL + TUOMEY MADE A VIRTUE OF WHAT WAS REGARDED AS AN AWKWARD SITE ON A SLOPING GROUND, RECOGNIZING THE CHARACTER AND COLOUR OF THE SURROUNDING TOWNSCAPE WITH THEIR ANGULAR RED BRICK FORMS

The lengthy fundraising campaign. Eventually the old lyric was demolished in 2006 and work began in 2009. The building campaign in itself had been an impressive achievement, but this was the most significant event undertaken by any arts organization in Northern Ireland. While over seventy percent of the £8.91 million project costs were sourced through grants from the Departments of Culture, Arts and Leisure, the National Lottery through the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, and Belfast City Council, it left the Lyric with over £25 million to raise from private and business donors. It included a gift of £4.1 million from Martin and Carmel "brick terraced houses and the more fluid hilly parkland of the river Lagan. At the last building at the bottom of Bedford Street, it steps down from the hill, grading in scale from the neighbouring council houses to form a hawk-like focussing around a large, open area covered by a sloping roof.

Each of the three principal functional elements has been housed in its own distinctive box with the public circulation spaces and main area wrapped around them. Asymmetrical forms and angular shapes, so obvious outside, characterize the interior also, where a complex and fragmented geometry steeps around a five-storey entrance staircase and lobby space. The sense of dynamic movement in the offices from the main entrance, leading up to the public bar and beyond to the foyer, down to lower levels and back around to a timber-clad gallery area, underlines the dynamic quality of the building's interior, with unexpected views from level to level. There is a satisfying feeling in materials at every turn. Warm red brick and smooth sandstone walls, with similar floors and concrete ceilings, mark out the public circulation spaces, while darkish timber floors and raw concrete walls are beyond, bathrooms and in the private corridors and minor staircases. All is fashioned with an artistic craftsman's eye combined with a theatrical intent.

Among the many delights from the nicely arranged big-window views out through the trees, to the sculptural concrete form of the angular glass cornerer with its polished terrazzo-like top, the main auditorium interior itself at the rear of the building, stands out as something very special. This is a beautifully detailed space, a 351-seat in single height, mesmerizing space, and an overall complex angular form, in which the stage and audience seem to share the same view, due to the theatrical setting of the secion between seating and stage. Designed to ensure optimum sight lines from every point, the seating is arranged asymmetrical, 70 degrees to the side of the stage, with a row of three seats high for individual expression.

The building is set between a typically grid-like pattern of red bricks and terraces housing the more fluid hilly parkland of the river Lagan. At the last building at the bottom of Bedford Street, it steps down from the hill, grading in scale from the neighbouring council houses to form a hawk-like focussing around an area covered by a sloping roof.