

Mill Girls

Verbal talks to **Martin Lynch** and **Brenda Winter** about the legendary Belfast play that changed the lives of the actresses involved forever.



'In the 1980s there were still a huge amount of old mill girls about, they're dying out now,' says Brenda Winter, one of the founding members of Charabanc Theatre company.

Charabanc's legendary Belfast play, *Lay Up Your Ends*, written with the help of Martin Lynch, is published for the first time this month, 25 years after its tour de force debut.

The script chronicles the lives of five women mill-workers from Belfast, around the time of the 1911 strike. It was an instant hit and went on to tour the world.

'It was an absolute phenomenon,' says Winter. 'We were loaned the Arts Theatre for one Sunday night performance, to launch, before we went into community centres with it.'

We didn't know anything about it at the time - we were onstage, doing a dress rehearsal - but a queue was forming outside which stretched the whole way up Botanic Avenue. People were clamouring for tickets - we probably broke every fire rule in the house that night - people were hanging from the rafters and at the end the audience was on its feet, they really took the play to their hearts.'

Charabanc was formed by five, young, local actresses, simply, claims Winter, to create some work for themselves. 'When I started my career there were very few parts for women about',

she says. The friends approached playwright Martin Lynch, who had already scored a couple of big successes, to write a play for them. 'They were fed up going for the smallest of parts at the Lyric theatre and getting knocked back, as the Lyric - at that time - was bringing over actresses from England to play parts that they could have done standing on their heads', he says.

Lynch had a better idea. 'Martin said 'Don't be silly, you're five women, you want a play about women, write it yourselves.' So we decided we would have a go. We were looking for a subject to research and the subject of Belfast Linen Mills came up so we

went about researching their lives', says Winter. The six of them devised the play together, with Lynch and Marie Jones taking on the actual writing duties. It was at this point that Jones, now an internationally respected playwright - most notably for *Stones in His Pockets*, emerged as a writer. 'I sent them all off to different rooms to start writing different bits and pieces and see who could write what and Marie came back with some scenes and her work was sparkling, it had that energy',

says Lynch. Jones is not the only success story to come from these humble beginnings. 'The career I've had I owe to Charabanc', says Winter, who went on to become the

first artistic director of REPLAY, NI's theatre-in-education company. A successful actor, director and writer, she has just written a play on the life and work of George Shiels as part of her PhD thesis on the famous Ulster dramatist.

Maureen Macauley is a choreographer and currently a much sought after stage manager. Carol Moore (Scanlan) is a successful actress and director, currently pursuing a burgeoning career as a film-maker and Eleanor Methven is now a highly successful Dublin-based TV, film and theatre actor.

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All of them are still based in Belfast apart from Eleanor Methven.

Lynch claims that he knew at the time that they were involved in something special. 'It was incredibly exhausting', he laughs. 'The five of these women together added up to a force three gale - the demands they placed on themselves, and me, were extraordinary - but the working process and the people involved created a fantastic energy. Plus, as we found out afterwards, we came up with a great play that audiences loved.'

The 25th anniversary edition of *Lay Up Your Ends* by Martin Lynch and The Charabanc Theatre Company was launched at Queen's Drama and Film Centre on Tuesday, 23 September, 2008 at 6.00pm.

Me-Con

Tammy Moore brings us the news from Northern Ireland's premier Science-Fiction Convention.



The 11th ME-CON was held in Queen's Student Union between the 29th and the 31st August this year. Compared to some of the big fantasy and SF cons out there - the likes of Fantasycon, World-Con and Comic-Con - it's a bit of a minnow: three rooms and the audience was sometimes out-numbered by the panel. That's actually one of the things that makes Me-Con worth attending. There's an intimacy to the panels that encourages lively discussion and an informal atmosphere.

It's one of the more relaxed conventions I've been to and is welcoming to both long-time attendees and newcomers.

Of course, the other reason to attend Me-Con is the impressive list of guests and panels that they can boast year after year. The discussions range from Children's Literature to the work of H.P. Lovecraft. There are also readings by authors, Dalek racing and a room set aside for watching everything from Dr Who to classic children's cartoons. This year there was also a book launch: *The Inferior* by Peadar O'Guilin. O'Guilin appeared on a number of the panels scheduled for Me-Con and it was clear he was a thoughtful writer with a sound grounding in SF/Fantasy. Other guests this year included author Michael Carroll, comic artists Paul J Holden and John McCrea and film maker John Vaughan. The guest of honour was the impressively bearded and talented Charles Stross, who appeared on a number of panels and also read from his latest novel, the Heinlein tribute novel *Saturn's Children*. Another book that is well worth a look, despite the cheesecake US cover that was used as a prop to show how Sci-Fi is marketed to boys. Stross manages to distinctly evoke Heinlein - in the narrative voice of his heroine and in the world itself - while still clearly maintaining his own unique style. A few of the scheduled guests were unable, due to professional commitments beyond their control, to make it this year. One was award-winning Belfast SF author Ian McDonald, usually one of Me-Con's mainstays and main supporters, and the other was Fantasy author C.E. Murphy, whose absence was particularly felt on the 'Hard Sci-Fi is for boys, Fantasy is for girls,' panel. Still, there's always Me-Con 12 - for them and us both.

Details for the 2009 Me-Con aren't up yet, but keep an eye on the website and maybe I'll see you there. <http://www.mecon.org.uk/>

See Tammy's interview with C.E. Murphy in next month's Verbal.