

Festival lights come on

Well culture vultures, it's here again. And half way through the Belfast Festival at Queen's is cookin'. Here's what's happened so far.

LEE PERRY / ULSTER HALL

It scarcely needs saying that Mr Perry is a scatty type. Emphasizing same is like ridiculing ethnomusicology or pointing at christians—needless. Perry is as mad as a wire basket hat filled with squirrels. Yet his hyper-real vision is so skewed as to pass through lunacy into reason again. Like this concert.

Not to say that he has not been on the Kingston café crèmes. That is plain from his first words to the crowd "Good evening from Inspector Gadget! Love from Inspector Gadget!".

Ah, yes. He spends the first half greeting the crowd as if this were Dublin. Did he think he was there? It seemed not from a later comment, related to the recent decommissioning act. "Peace to the IRA forever! Ah, indeed. I love you like the colour of my hair!". Well, of course you do.

He later satirized GWB and the current Operation Rearrange Rubble/Kill Somebody: "I am the allah, underneath the dollah, give me some hollah!" Anyone, like the crowd, would have done so. Had they had the merest notion of what he was saying. No matter. Perry provided a mighty and charming opening to the festival. Mad as a snail on roller blades.

FESTIVAL CLUB/ONGOING WEEKENDS @ ROBINSONS

Love nest for the artists and luminati over the duration of the festival. First Friday it was nicely peopled and tolerable music provided. Hijacked by the regulars on the Saturday it became a whorl of horridness and propped flesh. Shopping centre as beer-hall.

WILLIE DOHERTY/ORMEAC BATHS GALLERY

A fine commission of video and photographic works. Understated. The monochrome prints onto aluminum on the first floor were fascinatingly static; tangible.

NO PLACE LIKE HOME/NORTHERN BANK BUILDING

CIAN O'NEILL finds some early signs of life at the first Belfast Festival at Queen's under Stella Hall's careful tutelage, while, below, **JOHN KEYES** enjoys **Salomé**

A theatre experience with the refinement of a tin of spam on dry toasted Sumblest. The five actors tried valiantly to excite the audience, to save the piece. Such a task—like trying to race the 5,000 guineas atop a bag of glue. This work was ill conceived and politically unsubtle.

Also overfull of awful ideas. Large metal gates signifying division—redundant. Rancorous noise-offs of sectarian hatred to keep the crowd on edge—there is always Paris; there is also Windsor Park. One is enough and unnecessary of imitation. Intermittent mock north Ireland Tannoy announcements of grim humour—unfunny. Soundtrack of unsettling piano discord—went out with Christopher Lee's virility. Abstract dance choreography with suitcases—three words. Suitcases. On Ice.

This play, despite the truly brave efforts of the actors and one great soliloquy (brilliantly lit) by the younger male of two, faltered. Rare disappointment from the great Tinderbox company.

TEX MEX ARTISTS/OLD MUSEUM ARTS CENTRE

Exhibition of male artists work. Photographs of male body hair. A shed with a door which will not open fully. An abstract painting of a skeleton/cadaver slaked in vermilion and framed in black wood. Mini priapii. Not really enough works to make full sense of things.

MARK THOMAS/ELMWOOD HALL

Lasting nearly three hours, this show seemed to become something entirely other to comedy. It was, one hastens to add, hilarious. Yet more. Like a revival meeting for the politically sensate.

This worked much better than the last series of G's MTP, oscillating between acerbic wit and searing analysis faultlessly. He started quietly and by increment became more involved, charged. Deeply affecting. A cynic is either a bastard or cares and Thomas cares.

Frankly, he charmed the audience. He was incisive, brilliant on detail and masterfully punctuated. Standing ovation rightly given. Likely the highlight of the festival. On verra. ♦

Decadent richness

Of the current local shows on offer at this year's Belfast Festival at Queen's, Oscar Wilde's Salomé is the most striking, the most dramatically effective and, without doubt, the one with a dramatic provenance reaching back to the experimental European theatre of the late nineteenth century.

The play was translated by Lord Alfred Douglas and written by Wilde for the French actress, Mme Sarah Bernhardt.

The language is rich and gaudy, almost bedizened; to use of Wilde's favourite phrases it is jewel encrusted using the Hebraic rhetorical devices of repetition and inversion which build to a vocal highly effective climax.

The set and costumes by Chisari Yosimi are rich and barbaric and the lighting, by Martin Palmer, is dramatic, histrionic.

But it is the language that matters and the production, and Colin Carnegie has rarely shown greater skill or achieved more exquisite sounds and pictures.

He is well served by an excellent cast; JJ Murphy, a stalwart of the old Group Theatre; Sidney Dodsworth, whose services to subtle comedy can't be underrated.

The speaking of Wilde's verse is uniformly excellent and by no means easy for younger actors untrained in classical playing. But no awkwardness appears and Wilde's language is given its full decadent richness.

The quality of the verse speaking is by no means the least of this production's qualities; a play about lust in action, the erotic content is highly charged and superbly, sensually realised. And Carnegie has found a new way to present the Dance of the Seven Veils without reminding us too much of Rita Hayworth. ♦