

THE ABBEY THEATRE PRESENTS A KILKENNY ARTS FESTIVAL AND ROUGH MAGIC PRODUCTION



**ROUGH
MAGIC**

SOLAR BONES

WINNER OF THE IRISH TIMES THEATRE AWARDS BEST ACTOR & DIRECTOR

ABBAY THEATRE
20 – 29 OCTOBER 2022

ABBAYTHEATRE.IE
#SOLARBONES

Written by Mike McCormack
In an adaptation by Michael West
Directed by Lynne Parker

IMAGE BY PETER SEARLE



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CREATIVES AND COMPANY

Marcus Conway

Writer

Adapted by

Directed by

Set and Lighting Design

Sound Design

Costume Design

Associate Lighting Design

Dialect Coach

Production Manager

Stage Manager

Assistant Stage Manager

Stanley Townsend

Mike McCormack

Michael West

Lynne Parker

Zia Bergin-Holly

Denis Clohessy

Kathy Strachan

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We would also like to thank all Kilkenny Arts Festival and Rough Magic Patrons, without whom none of our work would be possible.

KILKENNY ARTS FESTIVAL

Since its foundation in 1974, Kilkenny Arts Festival has gathered many of the world's finest musicians, performers, theatre-makers, writers and artists in Ireland's medieval city. For ten days each August, the city's historic churches, castle, courtyards, townhouses and gardens and parks offer a magical setting for unique collaborations and intimate encounters between audiences and artists.

From outdoor theatre to contemporary dance, the Festival is dedicated to staging events of the highest calibre, thrilling audiences of all kinds. Classical music has been at the core of the Festival from the very beginning, and recent concerts have featured an astonishing number of globally acclaimed artists including Sir András Schiff, Alina Ibragimova, Nathalie Stutzmann, Alfred Brendel, Roderick Williams, Les Arts Florissants and the Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin.

In recent years the Festival has enriched its programme with major new initiatives like The Marble City Sessions, a cross-genre series of unique musical collaborations, hosted and co-curated by the great Irish fiddle-player and artist-in-residence Martin Hayes.

Indeed, artist residencies now lie at the heart of everything the Festival does, offering a combination of continuity and innovation that gives the Festival its unique spirit. The Festival's orchestra-in-residence, the Irish Chamber Orchestra, collaborates with leading national and international performers on concerts that combine the traditional with the thrillingly modern, while in recent years the position of poet-in-residence has been graced by everyone from Paula Meehan and the late Eavan Boland to former US laureates Billy Collins and Robert Pinsky.

Since 2018 Kilkenny Arts Festival has partnered with Rough Magic Theatre Company to critical and audience acclaim centred on a trilogy of outdoor site-responsive productions of Shakespeare, and including the co-production of the world premiere of Michael West's adaptation of Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* which was brought to the stage in the first year of the global pandemic.

ROUGH MAGIC

Rough Magic is one of Ireland's leading theatre producers and a significant mentor to emerging artists. It provides an unexpected angle to the mainstream and an anchor to the emerging generation.

Since its foundation in 1984, Rough Magic has produced over 135 shows, including 39 Irish premieres and 30 World premieres. Rough Magic is recognised both as independent creative entity and a valued institution. We operate as an ensemble across a wide spectrum of scale and style, covering international contemporary work, world classics and new Irish writing, with the audience at the heart of everything we do.

In 2021 the company launched COMPASS, folding play development and support for emerging theatre artists into the company's core programming. COMPASS will develop partnerships to produce major new commissions as we approach our 40th Anniversary and support artists at every level.

Awards include: a record number four Irish Times Irish Theatre Awards for Best Production (*Copenhagen* 2003, *Improbable Frequency* 2005, *The Taming of the Shrew* 2007, *Don Carlos* 2009); London Time Out Award; two Edinburgh Fringe First Awards and the Irish Times Irish Theatre Award for Best Ensemble for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 2018. Most recently Rough Magic's production of *Solar Bones* was awarded Best Actor for Stanley Townsend and Best Director for Lynne Parker at the Irish Times Irish Theatre Awards in 2022.

ABBAY THEATRE

As Ireland's national theatre, the Abbey Theatre's ambition is to enrich the cultural lives of everyone with a curiosity for and interest in Irish theatre, stories, artists and culture. Courage and imagination is at the heart of our storytelling, while inclusivity, diversity and equality are at the core of our thinking. Our art celebrates both the rich canon of Irish dramatic writing and the potential of generations of Irish theatre artists to come.

PROGRAMME NOTE

Michael West

When I first read *Solar Bones* I thought it was one of the finest Irish novels published in recent years. Having worked on it for this adaptation I'm convinced it's one of the finest novels of our time. As a piece of writing it is astonishingly achieved and sustained, and has a closing sequence to match anything you'll ever read.

This makes turning it into a theatre experience in some ways a much simpler — and others a more daunting — task. One of my early notes was something along the lines that if the book is the story of Marcus Conway's life, then the play must be the story of him discovering that he's dead.

In retrospect, this seems like a slightly forced distinction — but it was hugely helpful as a guiding principle in cutting the text of the novel.

The devastating loss for Marcus Conway is not of his own existence, but that he will never see his family again. The act of memory keeps them alive; he talks to ward off the silence which is the only certainty of death.

Colin Barrett's excellent review of *Solar Bones* from October 2016 in *The Irish Times* compares the book with Basinski's *Disintegration Loops*, an aural sculpture made from damaged old recordings. It's a very evocative comparison, and also draws attention to the book's construction as a series of overlapping loops, which keep the text moving in arcs around the central fact

of Conway's death, never quite landing or settling, and blurring the lines between the set pieces by making his utterances a continual distraction.

Working on the text we imagined a minimal space where Marcus Conway can think he is in his kitchen, but it is not really there either. Another early note to my collaborators says, "The feeling should be of a house under construction — or abandoned. Perhaps there are signs that it was the site office: dirty mugs, old newspapers, unexplained boxes, rubbish. And maybe opaque plastic sheets as a caul between this world and the next. Think ghost estates."

The prescience of the novel to channel a minor but significant infrastructural and environmental failure into musings about a wider societal collapse strikes us now as a nostalgic under-selling of what lay — and still lies — ahead. It certainly felt that way trying to rehearse and present it to a masked, distant, tiny audience in the lost year of 2020, in what remains one of the most depressing experiences of my life in theatre.

And yet we did present it — and here we are again!

As always, it takes a village to bring even a one-man show to life. I am grateful to Martin Murphy who suggested and started the project, to Stanley Townsend for so completely embracing the role and Lynne Parker for getting and keeping us all in the room with

grace and determination. Rehearsing and presenting a show under the constraints of 2020 was a hugely challenging experience, and we wouldn't be here without the support of the Kilkenny Arts Festival and Rough Magic's production and design teams, as well as the Arts Council. Thanks also to the original audiences who came in their masks to Kilkenny and who watched online. And personal thanks to Tracey Elliston, Olga Barry and Orla Charlton.

As well as being a love letter to the idea of family and community, I love that *Solar Bones* is also a poem to the act of writing and imagining, a pledge to hold faith with the kitchen table and the pages that emerge there. And while we always say the work is its own reward, the book is an inspiring story in

itself of excellence finding due recognition — published and edited to the highest standard by a small, young independent company, Tramp Press, and going on to win the Goldsmiths and the International Dublin Literary Award.

We are extremely grateful to Mike McCormack for letting us bring his beautiful work to you. We hope our stage version will introduce it to new audiences as well as those who already know and love it — and if it encourages anyone to read the book for themselves, I envy the pleasure that lies ahead of you.

Michael West

Dublin September 2022



Images by Ste Murray

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**“STANDING HERE
HEARING THIS BELL
SNAG MY HEART AND
DRAW THE WHOLE WORLD
INTO BEING HERE”**

Marcus Conway from **SOLAR BONES**

Written by **Mike McCormack** in an adaptation by **Michael West**



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