

# Arts & Books



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## Tiny plays: Big themes. Few words. Little time. Great response

A call for 600-word plays unleashed public passion. **Jim Culleton** of Fishamble outlines the process that will culminate in 25 of the pieces being staged next week

**L**AST AUTUMN, in an effort to reflect on the country's situation, we at Fishamble: The New Play Company called for submissions, through *The Irish Times*, for tiny plays that would add to the debate about where Ireland is and where the country is going. We asked people to consider what they could achieve with three or four minutes of stage time, what issues they felt needed to be addressed and what characters they wanted to bring to life. To start the project, we commissioned some of Ireland's top writers; a selection were published on these pages to share how writers had dealt with the challenge of writing a 600-word play that captured a glimpse, moment or encounter of contemporary relevance.

We were thrilled with the response to our September call, receiving more than 1,700 potential Tiny Plays for Ireland – an indication of how deeply the public feels about the issues explored in the plays and how keenly it feels the need to express them. Those tiny plays add up to more than double the length of *War and Peace*. We received plays about all aspects of life from every county on the island, as well as from more than a dozen other countries. The youngest playwright was seven years of age, the oldest 81.

The plays were full of passion, whether it was expressing anger at Ireland's economic situation, sadness at social injustice or joy at an expression of love in an everyday encounter. Writers were interested, of course, in perennial social issues, including homelessness, bereavement, politics and the recession, as well as in other, less expected areas. It was a privilege to read such a range of work and to get a picture of the ideas people from all over the country, and outside it, decided to express.

We are very grateful to all those who submitted plays and particularly pleased that so many people, whether their play was chosen for production or not, remarked that it had been a great catalyst to write a play and that it had given them the confidence and motivation to attempt other, more substantial work.

**OUR NEXT CHALLENGE** was to work out how to do justice to the level of creativity and interest the project generated. We decided to double the amount of plays we would stage, so Fishamble intends to mount two separate productions – one of 25 tiny plays at Project Arts Centre in Dublin from next Thursday until the end of the month and another of 25 more tiny plays within the following year.

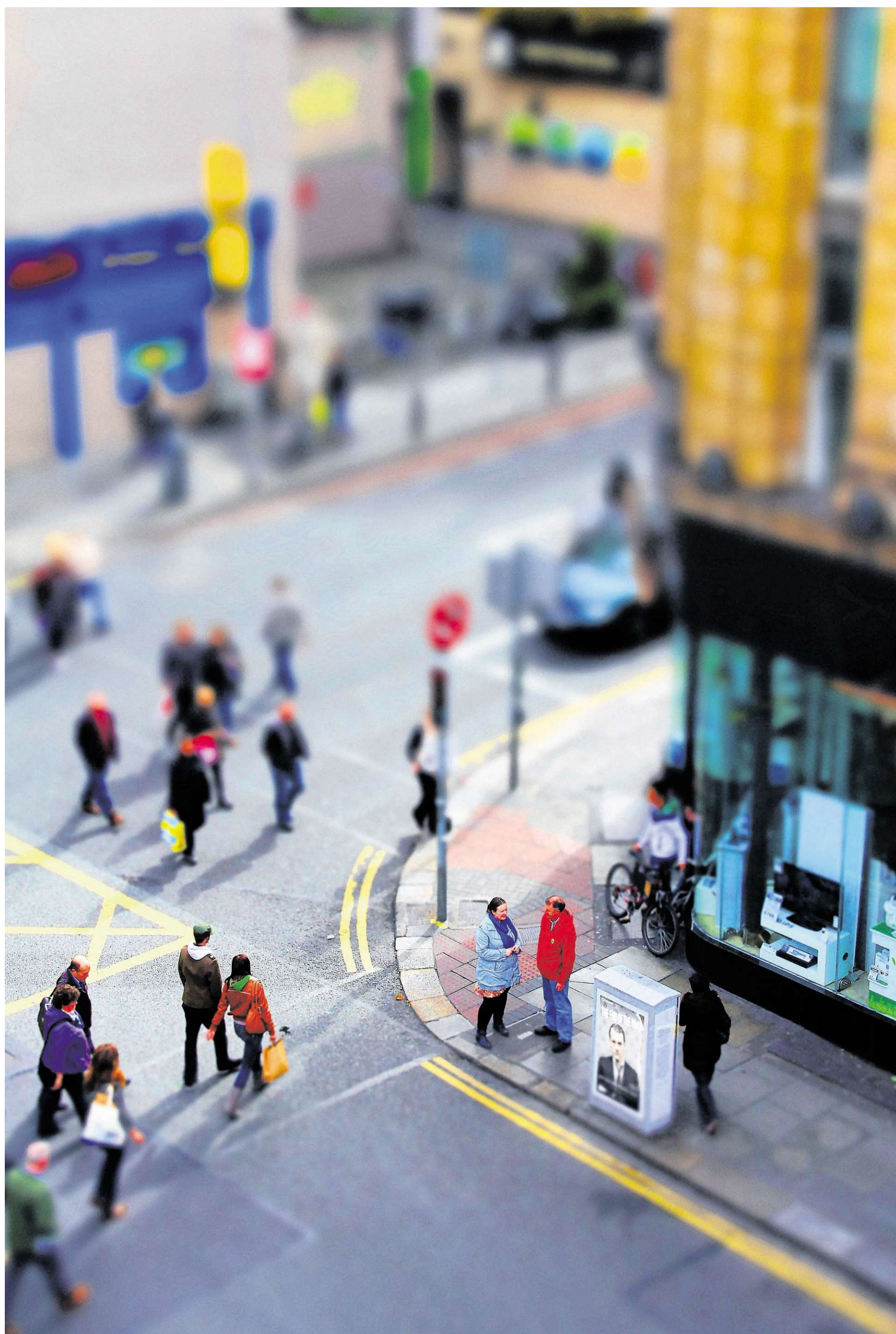
This still means that we are in a position to produce only a little more than 2 per cent of the plays submitted. We longlisted about a third of the submissions. Then we began the difficult process of shortlisting 200 or so. From then on, we felt all the plays could have been chosen for production based on their merit, so other criteria became important too. Some plays dealt with similar subjects, with a number of themes proving very popular, so we bore this in mind as we tried to ensure that the final selection would present a variety of perspectives, views and opinions about our country.



All the plays could have been chosen based on merit, so other criteria became important too

We were very struck by the number of plays that had a strong sense of theatricality, many using music or sound innovatively, or suggesting exciting ideas about their presentation. Some plays seemed to be parts of longer plays, or to need more stage time to deal with the issues raised, so those did not tend to be chosen for production. On the other hand, some plays were very slight and sketchlike and, even though it is hard to create a substantial piece of work in three or four minutes of stage time, we tended to favour plays that seemed complete and satisfying, with a turning point, a moment of discovery or a character progression that seemed to be just right for the time frame.

This meant that a huge number of plays, while excellent in their own right, did not get chosen. The 39 plays we selected depict events that include a woman singing to her husband as they dance on a carpet of unpaid bills; two old friends milking cows by hand during a power cut; a whole lifetime condensed into four minutes; a mother and her teenage son arguing over a sexist billboard at a Dart station; an outrageous sexual encounter between two financial asset managers; a man discovering naked



Focused on the details: Fishamble asked people to consider what issues they felt needed to be addressed and what characters they wanted to bring to life

### Play rights at Project

■ The plays start on Thursday and run until the end of the month at Project Arts Centre in Dublin

**Safety Announcement** by Joseph O'Connor  
*Poster Boy* by Antonia Hart  
**White Food** by Ardal O'Hanlon  
*Beat Him Like a Badger* by Rosaleen McDonagh  
**The King's Shilling** by Mark Hennessy  
*Between Us We Have Everything* by Karl O'Neill  
**Don't Take It Personally** by Rachel Fehily  
*Pastoral Care* by Gerald Murphy  
**Broken** by Deirdre Kinahan  
*Rainout* by Jesse Weaver  
**Calling Time** by Michael West  
*Commissions* by Niamh Creeley  
**A Deal Made in Drimnagh** by Sean McLoughlin  
*A Body* by Adrienne Michel Long  
**Dialogue** by Gregory Rosenstock  
*Debris* by Evan Lee D'Alton  
**A Life** by Ronan Geoghegan  
*The Nation's Assets* by Michelle Read  
**Tuesday Evening (Following the News)** by Darren Donohue  
*The Audition* by Rory Nolan  
**Guaranteed Irish** by Colin Murphy  
*Sure This Is It* by Ciara Ni Chuiric  
**It's a Lovely Day**, *Bill Withers* by Jody O'Neill  
*Unrequited* by Michael Cussen  
**Where Will We Go** by Dermot Bolger

photographs of his mother when clearing out the attic; and a teenager waiting on a platform for a train to arrive as he contemplates taking his life.

This last play is one of 119 submissions from young people: we chose some of these for the full production and will present a free public reading of others, to share the thoughts and ideas of people under 18 years of age with the public. This will be part of a larger programme of free debates and discussions accompanying the production.

**ONCE WE HAD CHOSEN** the plays, we needed to decide the order in which they would be performed. This decision was partly practical, working out how costume changes would take place to allow the actors to double up, for instance, but also about the experience the audience has of the production. Each play is unique, and I hope the production will allow each one to have its own space, to reflect the broad range of views expressed from a variety of communities.

The overall momentum of the production is also important, however, so that the evening will, with luck, be satisfying for the audience. The opening and closing plays (two of the commissioned plays, by Joseph O'Connor and Dermot Bolger) create a sense of theatricality that will inform the evening, as, for example, the actors are seen unashamedly helping each other change costumes during the production.

The running order of plays will begin with those set in early morning, progressing through the day, to night, back to early morning. This allows the action to progress through a 24-hour cycle, so a play set in Dáil Éireann late at night, or following the evening news, takes place later in the production than a play with a separated father collecting his child from school, or two teenagers waiting outside the school principal's office following a violent incident.

The production will be staged in the round, so the theatre resembles a mini sports arena or political forum. The set, designed by Sabine Dargent, resembles two paths intersecting, to create a sense of plays happening "at the crossroads". Although the audience will watch 25 plays in 90 minutes, we are keen to avoid 24 scene changes, so the set allows plays to exist in their own right while enabling the overall production to be fluid. Plays that involve characters walking on a journey should work well, and the set is flexible and abstract enough to facilitate the more surreal plays while allowing more realistic pieces to happen with minimal props or set pieces.

On the first morning of rehearsals, it was wonderful to see the room full of almost 50 writers and to hear such a varied range of opinions and insights. One of the writers commented that he felt part of a project that will capture the public consciousness. I hope we can do that, and am very grateful to everyone who has made it possible by sharing their work with us.

Jim Culleton is artistic director of Fishamble and director of Tiny Plays for Ireland