

The Importance of Being Purchased

By Cahir O'Doherty

FOR New York's celebrated Irish Repertory Theatre the stars have finally aligned. New awards and the \$4.7 million purchase of the Rep's performance space at 132 West 22nd Street have taken this celebrated theater to an exciting new level.

For Irish Rep cofounders Ciaran O'Reilly and Charlotte Moore the reality hasn't hit yet. It's the morning after they signed the multi-million dollar deal to purchase their new theatre, and they're still reeling from the drama of it all.

"It's the first time there's been an exclusively Irish owned and operated theater in New York since or Harrigan and Hart or Boucicault (famous Irish theatre makers of the 19th century) and that was two centuries ago now. We're very proud of the achievement," O'Reilly told the *Irish Voice*.

O'Reilly also enthusiastically praised the work of the Rep's Managing Director Patrick Kelsey. "Patrick was instrumental — he did a lot of the legwork on the details of this purchase. We could not have done it without him."

But as with so many artis-



The Irish Repertory Theatre's home in Chelsea.

tic endeavors, there's a major challenge ahead. The company decided to take a bank loan to secure the final installment of the purchasing price, and so for the first time in their 20-year history they've borrowed to meet a deadline and buy the space.

"Our organization defines not for profit. Business has been good, but in a 137-seat theatre you can sell out full price tickets and you would still not come out ahead," O'Reilly says.

"Not with that small number of seats and the costs involved, and not with the production values that we put into it."

Those same values (and of course the productions themselves) have been widely celebrated by the New York theater world. In 2005, for example, the Irish Rep won the coveted Lucille

Lortel award for their outstanding body of work.

And in an unexpected moment of serendipity, news that the Irish Rep has just won the \$100,000 Jujamcyn Theatre Award for the development of creative talent broke the day before they made the purchase.

Over the 12 years they have been in residence at their Chelsea space, Moore and O'Reilly have delighted their loyal audiences with the work of new Irish writers and with vivid new interpretations of Irish classics by authors as diverse as O'Casey, O'Neill, Friel, Murphy, Wilde, Synge and Shaw.

One of the most exciting aspects of their work as a company is their revivals of often overlooked early works by established masters. Their recent staging of

Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* was a revelation, revealing the artistic vitality and restless political conscience of the young author. By staging these risky works they have achieved a measure of standing that has made their capital campaign such a success.

The Rep's Artistic Director Moore is overjoyed with the purchase and ready to meet the challenges ahead. "In the 19 years we've been in business we have never owed anybody one cent. This is the first debt that we've ever undertaken," she says.

"We have managed to pay all our debts up to the minute and I'm sure

have come from any Irish play. "I was mopping the floor last night and I was thinking, you know, the floor looks even better now that I own it. I recognize the Irish in myself when I think things like that."

Moore is grateful of the support from the political and cultural organizations, public and private, that have secured the deal. In particular New York City Council Speaker Christine Quinn has championed the Irish Rep, securing the largest cash donations to the capital campaign.

"You don't think in a million years we would have gotten it if she hadn't been a red headed Irish woman

us a lot."

But Moore is also mindful of her audience. "We appreciate the support of the community — especially the Irish community — who have been especially generous to us since we started. Especially in the past year since we've been a little more aggressive in our programming and our fundraising.

"They've come to our aid and we expect them to go on coming to our aid until we get this gigantic bill paid. I hope we're honoring the Irish community by doing this."

Currently O'Reilly is in the rehearsal room gearing up for the American premiere of a new Irish play, a sensational Dublin hit called *Defender of the Faith*.

"It's a portrait of Northern Ireland in the 1980s and it's a very exciting, very tough play. It was a tough decision to do it and, by George, we're standing behind it and I'm sure everybody will find it interesting," Moore says.

"It's not sweet. It's written in the vernacular. You can't do a farmer in Northern Ireland saying please and thank you and aren't you sweet. You have to tell the truth. It's the way they talk."

Defender of the Faith begins previews on March 1.



Charlotte Moore and Ciaran O'Reilly.

we're going to work very hard to pay this one as fast as we can."

Although it's taking time to sink in, Moore follows up with a remark that might

making the decision," Moore said. "She's been extremely helpful and supportive and very strong in her opinions of us, and her vocal opinions have helped