

ARTS

MUST
SEE

□ **FESTIVAL:** John Banville and Jim Crace share the stage at Cúirt. Town Hall Theatre, 8.30 p.m.

□ **Arts on Monday:** Jason Ringenberg — minus the Scorchers

A lens among the leaves



Aidan Dunne

THE photographer Amelia Stein is probably best known for her photographs of theatrical and operatic productions. Through her involvement over many years with the Abbey Theatre, the Wexford Opera Festival, the Project Arts Centre, the Dublin Theatre Festival and with Rough Magic and Druid she photographed many if not most of the landmark productions mounted in Ireland — not to mention her work in theatre in London. She has also done much work in the music industry, mostly in collaboration with designer Steve Averill. She has also, however, consistently taken time to work on more personal projects, involving exhibitions and publications.

Still, her latest project comes as something of a surprise. For over a year she regularly visited and took photographs in the Great Palm House in the National Botanic Gardens in Glasnevin. "What happened was that the curator, Jobst Graeve, who happened to be in the library at the Botanic Gardens, mentioned that the Palm House was going to close for restoration for three years." She went to have a look. "It's a wonderful building, a haven and a refuge. For me, it's the eighth wonder of the world. I thought I would really like to take photographs prior to its closure."

She got in touch with Brendan Sayers, foreman and orchid specialist (and now television presenter on RTE's *Garden Heaven*) at the Gardens. "Brendan was fantastically helpful. He has this unfailingly positive attitude and is a real friend to artists. He makes you welcome and lets you get on with your work." During her visits to the Palm House, which averaged two every three weeks, she amassed more than 100 rolls of film. Many of these images record the physical fabric of the building on a large scale. "It's an exceptional environment, and as I got to know it I set about figuring out how to provide a visual record of the place, but also how to capture a sense of that lofty, leafy height, the lush vegetation, the humidity."

She also began to realise that the internal environment was exceptionally dynamic. "There was no point in looking at something one day and

Images evoking a sense of lofty, leafy height, lush vegetation, even humidity — photographer Amelia Stein captured all this, as well as the quietness and stillness of the Palm House, in a sumptuous set of pictures on exhibit next week

telling myself I'd photograph it next time around. Things changed all the time. Within a couple of days something that was just a curlicue unfurled into a big, open leaf. The next week the leaf might have fallen and curled up again. Different conditions in light and moisture changed the appearance and feeling of everything completely. So I devised this strategy of looking around and choosing one area that I studied on that particular visit."

Roughly speaking, her Palm House photographs fall into two categories: those that provide a more-or-less documentary sense of the building and its remarkable contents, and what might be called more subjective images that focus on aspects of the plants that make up the building's "pot and tub" culture. Her Rubicon Gallery exhibition (open from Wednesday) consists of the latter.

THE black-and-white prints are big, tonally rich with sumptuous surface textures, velvety darks and scintillating, creamy whites. They detail the spiky architecture of plants and building alike — "and how the plant forms cut across the geometry of the building" — and the intricate textures of leaf, pot and wall. In some photos, leaves and stems arch like calligraphic strokes. A withered banana leaf reminds her of a human spine. There is a tremendous quietness and stillness to almost all of them.

In fact, as Stein observes, this pervasive sense of "quietness and absence" was almost certainly influenced by her own circumstances at the time. She was nursing her father, Mendel, through his last illness. About four years ago her mother, Mona, had died. "Mendel missed her so much. Her garden was very important to her. The garden was in a way her refuge, a meditative place to retreat to. And that's what the Palm House became for me. I think that is the subtext to the quietness of the images."

At EV+A in Limerick, and at the Rubicon, Stein has exhibited photographs based on some of her mother's possessions, including her trowel and hand-fork, and her shoes. These were part of something that still en-

gages her: "The Mona and Mendel photographs", a project that will amount to a kind of family portrait in terms of absence, "portraits of absences, really", a documentation of the lives of her parents through the things they liked and used. "I'm doing it in such a way that I'm not making perfect images as such. It's more like a scrap book. I think eventually it will be my next exhibition."

She is currently taking a rest from theatrical work to attend to these personal projects. Her approach to theatrical work is famously painstaking and exacting, a million miles removed from publicity photographs in the normal sense of the term. For her, the challenge was always to look for the image that expresses the crux of the drama. "Eventually, what I was trying to do was to come up with an image that you could look at and say: 'That's *Dancing at Lughnasa*', or whatever, that the image encapsulates the drama in the way it is structured."

A collaborative venture with choreographer and dancer Cindy Cummings and poet Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, *Triúr Ban*, which resulted in a Gallery of Photography show and publication, led to a further, stunning series of photographs — "a figure in the landscape series" — undertaken with Cummings. "We found that we could work really well together." Stein hasn't yet done anything with these images.

Was the move from the crowded social space of theatre to the solitude of the Palm House a bit of a culture shock? "Not really. Work is always about being prepped and ready, of being in a certain frame of mind no matter where you are. And I haven't turned my back on theatre as such. My friends in theatre are still friends, and will remain so, so that's fine."

"But I think it's good to take a break from doing the same thing all the time. It gives you a sense of clarity about what you should be doing." The most she can hope for when it comes to the Palm House photographs, she says, is that "they should have the feeling of being beautiful prints — we can't do any better than that".

□ Palm House by Amelia Stein is at the Rubicon Gallery from May 2nd to May 26th (01-6708055)



Above, a palm tree radiating up toward the light, framed in time by photographer Amelia Stein (right, photograph: Alan Betson). 'There was no point in looking at something one day and telling myself I'd photograph it the next. Things changed all the time...'

