

Amelia Stein



Amelia Stein was a theatre photographer for twenty-one years. Colin Graham went to speak to her about her experience photographing plays and the landscape photography she has done since then.

Amelia Stein was the foremost theatre photographer in Ireland during an intense period of renewal and innovation in Irish drama from the mid-1980s up until the turn of this century. Stein reckons she took photographs of at least seventy-five first Irish productions, and over one hundred plays in total at the Abbey Theatre, along with work for Druid Theatre Company and Rough Magic. She also photographed over thirty productions, over 10 consecutive years, at the Wexford Festival Opera during the same period.

When I met her in January 2015, Stein's solo exhibition at the Royal Hibernian Academy, *Erris* had just opened. With its big sky, Mayo landscapes in one room, and the

textures of turf-cutting in Mayo in another, *Erris* seems far removed from the enclosure and actorly intensity of the theatre. Stein tells me that she hasn't done theatre work for fifteen years. 'I can't go in to a theatre now. Once I sit down in the seat and I hear the doors closing behind me I immediately find myself gasping for breath. I've spent far too much of my life shut in darkrooms, shut in theatres.'

We sat in her home in Dublin, under shelves which include at least fifteen neatly catalogued box files of negatives and contact sheets, a record of the development of theatre in Ireland in the last decade and a half of the twentieth century waiting to be mined. When I asked Amelia Stein how she began photographing theatre productions she went back to the 1980s in Dublin and the ad hoc beginnings of the Project and other theatre spaces and companies which started up, largely on their own initiatives, at the time. She remembers it as a time of collaboration, with actors, directors, musicians and herself as photographer working

in a spirit of 'complicity'. And this word constantly returns when she talks about how to photograph for theatre. It is not surprising that she now regards the theatre as a claustrophobic experience. The intensity with which she talks about the process of photographic performances suggests an absolute absorption in the event, simultaneous with a photo-journalist's need to observe deadlines and a commercial photographer's requirement to get the right shot for the client.

When I ask if she was ever tempted to put a visual spin on a play that was at odds with the director's or producer's, she politely makes it clear that the question is misplaced. A theatre photographer's role, in her view, is not to interpret. The images made by a photographer in the theatre may tell a story, but both images and image-maker are 'subservient to the performers', and it's not the photographer's role to critique. Nevertheless, as Stein then points out, she mostly only ever photographed theatre in black and white (and

I'll Go On
Barry McGovern at The Gate Theatre (1985)



Marie Mullen, actor and co-founder
of the Druid Theatre Company.

always on film). She talks of theatre itself as a black box which is gradually filled with light and movement, which sounds like the process of making a photograph, allowing light to enter a black box to make an impression. For Stein, there is an atmospherics to black and white which is in keeping with this darkened theatrical experience – just enough light let in to get a sense of the experience, not enough colour to expose it to over-scrutiny. In her time at the Abbey Theatre, Patrick Mason, then director of the Abbey, wanted Stein's photographs as a record of the productions. As we talk I wonder why Mason wouldn't just film the performance for an archive, but looking at Stein's photographs I can see a sense of the theatre as something co-operative, yet also fleeting and ephemeral, a performance which passes away. The partiality of photography seems appropriate, a record of the play, but not a full account, just as black and white retrospectively evokes the play as experience. Structurally and instinctively, I think, a good part of what Amelia Stein did for the theatre she photographed was dependent on a kind of discretion, knowing just how much of the play to expose, to record, to celebrate.

Looking at some of Stein's images I'm curious about two things. Firstly, when and how they were taken. And, second, how posed they are. As we discuss the processes she went through to get the images it's clear that the 'how' is variable, and depended largely on the financial resources of any particular theatrical company. With less well-funded productions she would have maybe one or two hours with the cast and the production, though this might come with the advantage of having this time devoted solely to making the photographs. Strategic scenes would be acted out in shorthand manner, usually chosen by the director. With bigger productions there was more time but less concession to her presence. Indeed, as she describes it, the experience sounds more something akin to being a sports photographer, with a privileged position set out for her, but one chance to get the photographs

as the action moved on.

In general Stein's method was, where possible, to watch a rehearsal and sketch out drawings and timings for possible photographs. Looking at many of her images from the theatre before I met her I'd been struck by the charisma of the best-known actors she'd photographed. Barry McGovern, for example, in Beckett's plays, cuts such a recognisable figure that I wonder how she coped with trying to photograph the acting and not the actor. Stein says there was rarely time for such considerations, and in response she tells me that the mutually understood requirement was that she needed a good shot of each of the main actors at their moment of most heightened emotion. So, did she pose the actors? Very rarely, she says. 'Actors have said to me, "I was waiting to hear the click before I moved on".' They were, if anything, posing themselves, trying to choose the moment for her.

When photographing the bigger productions in, for example, the Abbey, Stein's shoot would be at the dress rehearsal. She may have been at a tech rehearsal to map out shots, but once the dress rehearsal was underway she had to get what she needed, but couldn't stop the flow. At the Wexford Festival Opera she would photograph from a platform erected on top of the front rows of seats. Stein's assistant would pass her loaded films and the rehearsal would generally go on without any recognition of her presence.

She recalls these dress rehearsals with a fearful kind of fondness. She would be there, for example, when the director would talk to the entire cast and crew, preparing them for the opening night. She learnt to sense whether the production was ready or not. Whether the actors and technicians believed in the production's quality. And she says she learned the paces of particular directors – some would go over opening scenes again and again, so that later scenes were almost unrehearsed, while some would evenly pace the dress rehearsal.

As we talk about these practicalities it's clear that the dress rehearsals were high

tension occasions. Much as Stein had got to know most of the actors 'they'd probably prefer it if you weren't there', she says. And as I look again at some of her shots of actors in full flow I see the last-minute anxiety and effort going into the production. Rather than being the epitome of the play, these images are more like the aspirations of a play yet to be completed – and if theatre scholars are going to use Stein's photographs to get a sense of the look of a production, I wonder if they will see this too – that her photographs are of a company straining after something rather than attaining it.

The practicalities of theatre photography are perhaps most starkly evident when Stein reminisces on her work on Wexford Festival Opera. There she would be providing press photographs for newspapers and magazines in Ireland and across the world, covering three operas, each of which would rehearse one night after the next.

After rehearsals, over consecutive nights, volunteers and Stein would drive to Dublin with over forty rolls of film, process them, make contact sheets, duplicate sheets, and get them back to Wexford each day. Forty prints per show would then be made available for the international press to pick up in Dublin and Wexford for opening night. And again the main concern was that the rehearsal images had to look like a full production – so singers who chose not to wear their wigs for dress rehearsals, or decided to keep their Doc Martens on for comfort, ruined the shot.

Given the high-octane nature of this kind of work, it is not entirely surprising that Stein choose to give it up after twenty one years. She tells me that it was really the advent of digital which finalised the decision for her – the investment needed to make the move to digital, at the time, was out of proportion to what was being offered as remuneration. But she was also clearly relieved to have stepped outside of these black boxes. Now she has an archive which is probably unique in Irish theatre and drama. Researchers contact her and ask if they can have images – she wryly points out that



they imagine all photographs as being digital, and therefore easily retrievable. But most of her archive sits above our heads, still in negatives and contact sheets.

When we first met I told Stein that my favourite theatre image of hers is one that a former colleague of mine had on the cover of his book about Irish theatre. It's of a production of *By The Bog of Cats* by Marina Carr, from 1998. Two actors stand on a shallow terrace and behind the stage set is a swirling, dark, clouded sky. Stein's image is definitively of the play, but it is also, coincidentally, redolent of the 'big sky' photographs which she had on show at the R.H.A. when we met. So I wondered if that kind of 'drama' is something she has taken over with her from theatre into her current passion, landscape photography. She thinks about this,

as with everything, very quickly, and says that, no, it is not this. Theatre photography teaches you mainly about the 'layering of the image and the use of out-of-focus'. And I can see this in some of her 'big sky' landscapes, when the image shifts, dizzyingly at times, between the habitations which are their initial centre and the skies which loom up from behind the houses and barns and then take over the image.

As Stein talks about her landscape photography it strikes me that there is another cross-over from her theatre work, something practical and dramatic in its own way. When we talked about her work in the National Theatre in London she mentioned how they built her a platform on top of the front row for rehearsals, just as the Wexford Festival Opera might have done. But in the National they sent a technician onto the platform to

walk it, to make sure it was safe for her to stand on. On the Irish stage she had to take her chances. When Stein talks to me, as we finish the interview, about having just come back from photographing cliffs in the west of Ireland, she describes having to take a walking pole with her to plant in the ground while she photographs, and putting her 'toe to the pole' to make sure that she doesn't get too close to the edge of the cliff. It's not just, as she says, that the sudden passage of light across a landscape can be 'like theatre, maybe' – photographing the landscape, for Stein, has the same precipitous, precarious and urgent physicality that was in her theatre photography.

Colin Graham