

Adventures In Education

For the past two years, Derek O'Connor has been working closely with Letterkenny Arts Centre on a series of innovative arts education programmes. Currently based in the US, here he offers the fourth in an occasional series of reports for Donegal Culture.

Roxy Toporowych is a twenty-something Ukrainian-American (first generation), originally from small-town Idaho, now based in New York City and an aspiring documentary filmmaker. Over the past three years, she's clocked up hundreds of hours working on her first feature, a portrait of the Ukrainian folk dancing community in New York City, entitled Folk! Anybody out there who might think the subject matter sounds a tad dry possibly isn't that au fait with the Ukrainian community in NYC – a combustively colourful and creative bunch, and the backbone of the city's alternative arts scene – we're a long way from Riverdance territory here. The proof can be found in the movie itself; a fascinating, funny and vivid portrayal of a people and a passion for dance that, like all the best documentaries, proves more dramatic, compelling and balls-out entertaining than the majority of fictional features being produced right now. "I got out of film school," says Toporowych, "and I had spent a few years doing crappy jobs in film. I was getting really mad at myself for not being creative, not doing my own thing – I really needed to make something." Having trained as a Ukrainian folk dancer since the age of five, Roxy had her subject; before long, what was intended as a fifteen-minute short promptly ballooned into something considerably more epic in scope. "You start to shoot,

then you discover all these stories unfolding, then you start shooting more, and more and more... You're working without a big crew, you have a camera, it's cheap to shoot (Folk! was filmed, as are the majority of documentaries these days, on digital video), and you have all this access... Then it's six months later, and a fifteen minute film has become a forty minute film, and now a feature." Roxy Toporowych's journey mirrors that of an entirely new generation of DIY documentarians; get a camera, find a cool subject and well... let it roll. Fact: The past few years have been an incredible time for documentary filmmaking – whereas non-fiction films had previously belonged to the outer margins of the distribution circuit, nary a month passes these days without a new documentary feature making a splash. Blame it on anything from the success of Fahrenheit 9/11 to the availability of cheap technology and explosion of reality-based television. The perceived wisdom used to suggest that the prevalence of reality TV would debase and destroy the medium. Instead, it's had the opposite effect; feature-length documentaries have become bold, more audacious and wilfully idiosyncratic – compare and contrast, by way of example, such recent notables as Jonathan Caouette's nakedly autobiographical freeform psychodrama Tarnation (compiled from years of Caouette's Super 8 and video diaries, and edited using demo iMovie software) and Ondi Timoner's remarkable Dig! (the twisted car-crash rockumentary detailing the rivalry between Portland bands The Dandy Warhols and The Brian Jonestown Massacre). Music and performance movies are notably flourishing like never before, liberated from the formulaic VH1-isation of a previously moribund genre – it took nearly twenty years, after all, to escape from the shadow of Spinal Tap.

There has been an outrageous amount of essential music docs in recent months, with many more set for release; Jeff Feuerzeig's The Devil And Daniel Johnston, Margaret Brown's Be Here to Love Me: A Film About Townes Van Zandt, Greg Whitley's New York Doll (an intimate portrait of New York Dolls bassist Arthur 'Killer' Kane's brief return to glory with a reformed Dolls, cut short by his untimely death from cancer)... The list goes on and on. Time and again, it all comes back to a camera, a subject and an eye for a story – which is why you will watch Roxy Toporowych's Folk! – and, when you get the opportunity, you really, really should – and leave with a newfound respect for the world of Ukrainian folk dancing. "I feel so lucky," she says. "I'm really happy that I started making a documentary when I did. Growing up, I would search



Folk!



and search for documentaries to watch, they seemed so hard to track down. Now there are all these crazy, amazing films, and there's an audience there that truly appreciates them. I'm able to make a film like *Folk!* and have complete creative control, do it my way and in my own time. It's not about money. It's about making a cool documentary – and anyone can make one."

A longer version of this article originally appeared in *Foggy Notions* magazine.

For more information on *Folk!*
go to www.kinorox.com

Letter From NYC

Former Arts Centre Employee Derek O'Connor offers the latest news from across the pond...

I must apologise – I've been on the blog for several weeks now. The newest twist on our New York adventure has been a retreat into a virtual universe called 'Planet Ireland'... And it's a very, very strange place indeed. It works a little like this; I'm editing a new blog (that's an on-line journal, for those who live in blissful ignorance of the joys/evils of the internet), one aimed at all the Irish folk across the globe missing the news from home – it's called *Blogorra*, and you'll find it at www.blogorra.com The inspiration behind its creation was one's current state of affairs; suddenly finding ourselves far from home, we're always keen to keep up with current events – riots in Dublin, police corruption in Letterkenny, idle chatter from Steve's chipper in Ramelton, stuff like that... rather swiftly,

however, the reality of the situation became painfully apparent; for all the talk of how the broadband will change our lives (apart from giving the powers that be licence to dig up as many roads as possible – you can't complain, after all, because once we have the broadband, after all, there'll be jobs for everyone), Ireland still hasn't gotten its head around the internet. How do I know this? Because I now spend a fair to decent amount of every bloody day trawling through the web in search of information to share with my fellow immigrant brethren – and it 'aint easy. As one of the least tech-savvy people imaginable, the notion of my engaging in the creation of a blog has been the subject of much hilarity; here's the thing, though – if I can do it, anyone can do it. And nobody's doing it. The Irish web presence is still, by and large, incredibly bitty. It's wonderful to be able to tune into radio stations on-line – waking up in Jersey City and being able to tune into Highland Radio is a curiously reassuring thing, although listening to RTE Radio One tends to lead to anxiety and/or severe agitation, something to do with the accumulated effect of Ryan Tubridy and Pat Kenny. The best source for free news happens to be *The Irish Independent* (you have to pay for *The Times*, although their arts supplement, *The Ticket*, is available for free), although Kevin Myers' new column is only available in the print edition, which suits us just fine.

Here's the thing, however – as a medium for expression, for collaboration, for simply getting the word out there, the potential is high on limitless. Right now, there's a criminal lack of imagination, of lateral thought, being used by the Irish on-line presence, particularly amongst the arts community – website after website offering perfunctory listings and information. The number of decent Irish arts-related blogs, for example, can be counted on one hand... Google Sinead Gleeson's *Sigla* or Belinda Mc Keon's *Empire State View*, for starters, or take a gander at West 47, Galway Arts Centre's on-line literary journal (the future of all those labour-of-love DIY small-print publications? Why not...) The opportunity to get your information out there on a truly global scale is at your fingertips; if I can do it, it's fair to say that, with a little assistance and perseverance, pretty much anybody can... As a recovering luddite, I say give it a try, I'm hoping to experience the *Earagail Festival* virtually sometime very soon. Best to the *Letterkenny* massive, hope all is well, looking forward to seeing the new arts centre...

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