A thrust stage in semi-darkness is crisscrossed with searchlights as the performers enter and take up positions at small covered tables at the edge of the elevated playing area. The roving spots and low blue and green lights reveal a vague silhouette skyline and a line of six tall pillars. A band is positioned to the side of the stage. Their music gives way to the sounds of sirens, the bleeping of code and radio interference. Lights converge on Peter Hanly, bespectacled, dressed in a brown suit with an argyle vest and tie, perched on a high stool at a large curved wooden bar counter centre stage. Somewhat gangly but at ease, he addresses the audience in an RP accent, overtly presenting himself as the narrator of a story about to unfold. “Some of us were born to be spies”, he opens, “not me, though, I sort of fell into it by chance”. His tale of answering “an ad in the Telegraph”¹ is delivered in rhyming verse accompanied by music, and an encounter with a “soft-spoken” Colonel is re-enacted. The Colonel, decked in military regalia, pops up abruptly from behind the counter with a sheaf of papers concerning the risks of Irish Nazi sympathizers, bizarre meteorological broadcasts and a mission to Ireland: “A field agent! Crikey! I flushed with pride, / Though I had assumed Éire was on our side. / Oh, I know they’re independent, and neutral as such; / But really, aren’t they British, pretty much?” exclaims Hanly’s character, Tristram Faraday. With a sigh the Colonel disappears behind the counter. Blackout.² The first scene of Improbable Frequency promises

¹ Arthur Riordan and Bell Helicopter, Improbable Frequency, London: Nick Hern Books, 2005, 3 (all subsequent references to the play are to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text).
² Improbable Frequency was first performed on 27 October 2004 at the O’Reilly Theatre, Dublin, and transferred to the Abbey on 4 March 2005. From November 2008 to January 2009 the play was produced at the 59E59 Theatre, New York. This
historical intrigue, a maladroit narrator and a potentially rich seam of irony. Clearly, too, the set design, music, rhyme and mixed diegetic levels augur a ludic attitude towards theatrical convention.

Since its foundation in 1984, Rough Magic Theatre Company has been committed to bringing innovative new theatre writing to the Irish stage. Initially much of this work was non-Irish, though latterly the focus has been on fostering new Irish writing as well as creative adaptations of classics, such as *Phaedra* or *The Taming of the Shrew*. Central to their project has been the belief that Irish theatre was, as Lynne Parker put it, rather “inward looking” and that exposure to other voices and dramaturgies is necessary and vital. As one of the productions marking Rough Magic’s twentieth anniversary year *Improbable Frequency*, written by founding member of the company Arthur Riordan, with music by Bell Helicopter, synthesizes some very familiar motifs in Irish theatre – national identity, linguistic virtuosity, history and memory – with forms not so prominent in its history – the musical and the cabaret. Patrick Lonergan cites many of the Irish points of reference in his review of the 2004 production, remarking how it combines elements of “the comic absurdism of Beckett, Behan’s politicised vaudeville, Boucicault’s melodrama, and the gallows-humour cynicism of Ireland’s younger writers”. It also treats an historical moment that has long-term ethical resonance, one that has arguably been among the most important, if discreetly suppressed, factors in the shaping of Irish identity since the 1940s.

In 2004, just ten years after the official conclusion of the state of emergency in existence since 1939 and almost sixty years after the end of World War II, *Improbable Frequency* tackles the issue of Irish neutrality. It is not the first play to do so, though in contemporary theatre Frank McGuinness’ *Dolly West’s Kitchen* (1999) is the only immediate predecessor. In contrast to the naturalistic and discursive mode of *Dolly West’s Kitchen*, however, *Improbable Frequency* is staged as a cabaret comedy; its set involves minimal props and

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