

THE SCOTSMAN

Tue 16 Sep 2003



Birds of Paradise's *The Irish Giant* - based on the story of freak show performer Charlie Byrne - plays throughout Scotland until 4 October.
Picture: Stephen Mansfield

Disabling our prejudice

Susan Mansfield

EJ Raymond has wanted to be an actress for as long as she can remember. "Even from when I was very young, I was always acting," she says. "After my daughter was born I went to Ayr College to do an NC in performing arts. I knew it would be hard for me, but I still loved it."

Raymond knew it would be hard because she is profoundly deaf, but she wasn't going to let a little thing like that stand in her way. Now she juggles careers in acting and writing with being a single mum to Georgia, aged four and a half, and one day hopes to make a film.

"I've been brought up in a hearing world all my life, so I've always been challenged through different things," she says. "When I arrived at Birds of Paradise Theatre Company, I thought it was going to be hard, but people in theatre are open, able to communicate on each other's level. Everybody has an equal chance in here, it's not a problem at all. Now my daughter wants to become an actress like me."

Raymond is one of a cast of seven actors currently touring Scotland with a new Birds of Paradise production, *The Irish Giant*. Started ten years ago as a professional theatre company for actors with disabilities, they are embarking on an extensive tour in this the European Year of the Disabled. While they promise a story-based show which is not agenda-heavy, they will also challenge certain preconceptions about disabled theatre.

Garry Robson's play is about a group of disabled activists who break into London's Hunterian Museum to "reclaim" the skeleton of Charlie Byrne, "the Irish Giant", a star of the freak show circuit in the 18th century. Leaving Ireland in search of a better life, Byrne, a towering eight foot two, made his fortune in a society which was fascinated by voyeurism.

However, towards the end of his life, he was pursued by leading anatomist James Hunter who hoped to obtain his body for dissection. Byrne, a Catholic, tried to foil his plans by paying a funeral company to bury him at sea, but, by a series of bribes, Hunter obtained his body against his wishes.

But the group's radical attempt to reclaim a piece of disabled history doesn't go according to plan. They are forced to take a closer look at Byrne's life and the world in which he lived. Unpalatable though freak shows seem to us, they allowed many people who might otherwise have been locked up in an institution to form their own communities and in some cases even become wealthy. A dwarf, General Tom Thumb of the Barnum circus, was one of the first showbusiness millionaires.

Playwright and director Robson, who is himself disabled after contracting polio as a child, came across Charlie Byrne when researching *The Last Freak Show*, a play he devised with London-based disabled theatre company Graeae. "I was interested in how freaks related to disabled people today. Like a lot of disabled people, I get stared at all the time when I walk with my sticks. Freak shows allowed people to seize the means of production, to make the public pay for the privilege of looking. It's a moot point

“Casting directors are looking at least to cast disabled actors in disabled roles, and hopefully in the future in other roles that are nothing to do with disability”

Rescuers Speaking

Michael Rajnik



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Table of Contents Rescuers Speaking

1. Understanding the eBook Rescuers Speaking
 - The Rise of Digital Reading Rescuers Speaking
 - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying Rescuers Speaking
 - Exploring Different Genres
 - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
 - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
 - Popular eBook Platforms
 - Features to Look for in an Rescuers Speaking
 - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from Rescuers Speaking
 - Personalized Recommendations

- Rescuers Speaking User Reviews and Ratings
- Rescuers Speaking and Bestseller Lists
- 5. Accessing Rescuers Speaking Free and Paid eBooks
 - Rescuers Speaking Public Domain eBooks
 - Rescuers Speaking eBook Subscription Services
 - Rescuers Speaking Budget-Friendly Options
- 6. Navigating Rescuers Speaking eBook Formats
 - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
 - Rescuers Speaking Compatibility with Devices
 - Rescuers Speaking Enhanced eBook Features
- 7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
 - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of Rescuers Speaking
 - Highlighting and Note-Taking Rescuers Speaking
 - Interactive Elements Rescuers Speaking
- 8. Staying Engaged with Rescuers Speaking
 - Joining Online Reading Communities
 - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
 - Following Authors and Publishers Rescuers Speaking
- 9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books Rescuers Speaking
 - Benefits of a Digital Library
 - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection Rescuers Speaking
- 10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
 - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
 - Minimizing Distractions
 - Managing Screen Time
- 11. Cultivating a Reading Routine Rescuers Speaking
 - Setting Reading Goals Rescuers Speaking
 - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
- 12. Sourcing Reliable Information of Rescuers Speaking
 - Fact-Checking eBook Content of Rescuers Speaking

- Distinguishing Credible Sources
- 13. Promoting Lifelong Learning
 - Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
 - Exploring Educational eBooks
- 14. Embracing eBook Trends
 - Integration of Multimedia Elements
 - Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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