

THE ADELAIDE
R E V I E W

JUNE 16, 2017 by DM BRADLEY

This collaboration between Paul Kelly (co-creator, guitarist, singer), Camille O'Sullivan (co-creator, singer, sound effects) and Feargal Murray (co-creator, pianist), with the help of many others, is a moving chronicle of a century or so's worth of Irish poetry and music, and it's a remarkable achievement, if, just occasionally, a little bewildering for the unprepared.

With no explanation, Kelly, O'Sullivan, Murray and band took to the stage and began with a pair of Seamus Heaney pieces, *Digging* and *Act Of Union*. The themes of the night became apparent quickly: love, loss, the sheer power of the Irish landscape (and weather) and the many battles of its people.

Songs, poems set to music, spoken-word sequences and even a little acting followed, as O'Sullivan intermittently seemed almost moved to tears, Kelly at one point strikingly stood on a chair in the spotlight, confetti (standing in for snow) fell and the performers restlessly moved about the stage, as if nervous at all the emotion.

Particular highlights included: Patrick Kavanaugh's stirring *In Memory Of My Mother* and, later into the second half, *In Memory Of My Father*; three W.B. Yeats offerings, *Easter 1916*, *An Irish Airman Sees His Death* and *September 1913*; Jimmy McCarthy's almost rocking (and certainly loud) titular tune; and the savage Paula Meehan piece *The Statue Of The Virgin At Granard Speaks*, which sent us off to interval somewhat stunned.

Although we've come to expect great things from the brilliant Kelly (a sort of unofficial Oz poet laureate for over 30 years now), he was more than equalled by O'Sullivan, whose sometimes raspy voice and fire suggested a long-lost Emerald Isle cousin of Patti Smith. When the end finally came, along with final bows and another dynamite refrain of *Ancient Rain*, it was obvious that she was simply delighted and, by this point, so was the audience.

***Ancient Rain* was performed at Her Majesty's Theatre on Thursday, June 15**

<http://adelaidereview.com.au/arts/performing-arts/review-ancient-rain/>



Ancient Rain Stephen Davenport – 16 June 2017

Paul Kelly and Camille O’Sullivan blend cabaret with Irish poetry in *Ancient Rain*, and the results are sombre, devastating and enthralling.

There is an elegiac quality throughout this performance and a feeling of hiraeth as both storytellers keep the audience riveted with tales of death, war, mutiny and rebellion, and also of love, faith and hope.

Both Kelly and O’Sullivan are at the top of their game but it’s the poems that are the real stars.

A spade digging in Ireland’s bog opens proceedings and a delicate curtain of snow ends the show. In between is 100 years of Irish toil, struggle and hardship as seen through the eyes of some of the Emerald Isle’s greatest poets, including WB Yeats, Donagh MacDonagh, Paula Meehan and James Joyce.

All are set to a superb soundscape from four outstanding musicians – Feargal Murray (piano), Paul Byrne (percussion), Dan Kelly (guitar) and Sokol Koka (cello) – which is haunting, moody and punctuating, while leaving space for Kelly to weave his magic and O’Sullivan to appear like dynamite with a laser beam. All reach into the soul of the poetry and drag out the terrible beauty within.

This is anything but a pretentious piece, and is impressive for its willingness to address the controversies inherent in the poems. It provides a fascinating exploration of life, and an aching emotional testament to the human condition.

A highlight is the final piece in Act One, when O’Sullivan performs Paula Meehan’s *The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks*. The music is confrontational and the Irish-French chanteuse delivers the song with the vehemence and precision of an artillery barrage. She is spellbinding in her theatrical embodiment of the statue of the blessed Virgin Mary. As is Paul Kelly as he re-imagines WB Yeats’ *An Irish Airman Foresees His Death*.

From the first piece, Seamus Heaney’s *Digging*, to the ending of James Joyce’s *The Dead*, this production is almost flawless. With its mixture of poetry, song, music and performance, *Ancient Rain* is an intriguing and absorbing work.

The Advertiser

Adelaide Cabaret Festival 2017 review: Ancient Rain

TIM LLOYD,

June 16, 2017 10:18am

This concert reminds you of the time when a young Paul Kelly, aged perhaps 17, headed up to Carclew to try his hand at delivering his poetry. A lot has happened, but the love of words and how they work in performance, whether as dialogue, verse or song, is so true to Kelly still.

No, we did not have a Paul Kelly concert. Instead, this show, delivered in tandem with Irish singer Camille O'Sullivan, is directed by Chris Drummond as a production delving into the troubled music of Irish verse and the sad stories it tells of famine, rebellion and love's tragedies.

These themes then take on wildly emotional dimensions as they morph into a series of songs, and short, but brilliant and virtuosic duets.

Two greater inter-continental talents at performing one great culture of words would be hard to imagine. Here the poetry plucks at you from Seamus Heaney, Yeats and Patrick Kavanagh and a simple conversation from James Joyce is riveting. To watch the words turn into powerful song is something to be celebrated for its bravery and élan. It is all held together by the refrain from the Jimmy MacCarthy song, *Ancient Rain*.

It helped that Feargal Murray is exquisite on keyboards and that a backing of percussion, electric guitar and cello moves the audience across those hard, bare and wintry landscapes.

Designer Gaelle Mellis's stage is set out as a kind of salon, where the six artists sit around on chairs and performances seem to evolve by accident into something transcending.

<http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/entertainment/arts/adelaide-cabaret-festival-2017-review-ancient-rain/news-story>

Written by [James Murphy](#) Friday, 16 June 2017 09:43

As storytellers in 'Ancient Rain', Paul Kelly and Camille O'Sullivan employ drastically divergent means to arrive at a harmoniously concordant end: the genuine evocation of the spirit of Ireland, in all its ragged and bloody glory.

Camille O'Sullivan is the flamboyant Nick Cave to Paul Kelly's stoic Leonard Cohen; she is the Oscar Wilde to his Banjo Paterson; her voice can range from a raw and solitary whisper to a husky, primal howl, while he can convey the breadth of human experience with a laconic delivery of deceptive versatility; she appeared on stage adorned in rich and vibrant burgundy, while Paul came on in a suit of earthy brown. United on stage to present Irish poetry set to original compositions, these descendants of the same soil and cherishers of shared traditions delivered a work of profound beauty.

While sitting in the audience, I felt a little like one of Robin Williams' students in 'Dead Poets Society': "right, after this I gotta go home and read ALL the poetry, underline the phrases that inspire and scribble comments in the margins". Indeed, for audiences unfamiliar with the source texts, there was much to digest. Both performers, though, possessed as they were by a passion so tangibly apparent, skilfully conveyed even the wordiest of tales.

Camille's rendition of 'The Statue Of The Virgin At Granard Speaks' by Paula Meehan was of such indescribable beauty and tragedy that it requires a poem itself in its honour; mere platitudes are insufficient to convey the emotions unleashed by witnessing this sprawling tour de force. It was such a fiery and convincing condemnation of the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church that it would make the Pope blush with embarrassment.

Equally political was Paul's 'A Demonstration', a 2014 protest poem about events a century and a half ago, was jarringly relevant to our current global plight. On 'Quarantine' and 'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death', Paul contemplated the riddle of mortality. Together, the two were triumphant on 'Digging' and 'Ancient Rain', with both featuring the mournful weep of the cello, the pound of percussion, the euphoric wail of the electric guitar and Feargal Murray's intricate work upon the piano.

'Ancient Rain' is a master work; Paul Kelly continues to daringly expand upon his legacy as one of Australia's finest musicians, while Camille O'Sullivan can reinterpret like no other; she doesn't simply reinterpret, she makes the work of others her own.

★★★★★



Ancient Rain (Dark Mofo) - Federation Hall

Jun 10th 2017 | Katie Little

Singer and actor **Camille O'Sullivan** describes poetry as a "living art form" in her home country of Ireland. Together with iconic Australian singer-songwriter **Paul Kelly** and pianist and composer **Feargal Murray**, they have created *Ancient Rain*, a moving tribute to one hundred years of Irish poetry, set to music works by Yeats, Heaney and Kavanagh along with more contemporary poets. The result is one part folk, one part theatre and one part rock opera.

Kelly's voice with its distinctively flat timbre is the perfect compliment to O'Sullivan, who whispers, rasps and passionately sings and acts her way through the repertoire. The highlight of her performance is the incredibly moving rendition of *The Statue Of The Virgin At Granard Speaks*, a poem by Paula Meehan that tells the story of a fifteen-year-old girl who dies giving birth at the foot of a statue of the Virgin Mary.

Each musician on the stage adds to the flavour of the performance. From Kelly's trademark folk sounding electric-acoustic guitar, to his nephew Dan Kelly's lead guitar and effects pedals which add to the drama of the fuller numbers. Murray on piano and keyboard is masterful, as is percussionist Paul Byrne who plays his kit with flair and takes to the front of the stage with a traditional Irish Bodhran drum. A surprisingly lovely addition to the band is Sokol Koka on cello who stretches the limits of what his instrument can do, with dazzling pizzicato and playing so high on the fret board at times to sound more like a violin.

Ancient Rain played to a full house at the Hobart Federation Concert Hall on Saturday night to kick off the start of the Dark Mofo festival, and although the audience seemed enthusiastic, there was uncertainty whether most had been brought in by the big ticket name of Paul Kelly and were expecting something entirely different and more familiar. One thing about Dark Mofo attendees, however, is their willingness to embrace experimental art forms and *Ancient Rain* is definitely that, not fitting the mould of traditional theatre, and instead forging a new genre out of an unlikely combination of spoken word, musical theatre and a live band.

If you have an interest in Irish poets or history you will no doubt love *Ancient Rain*, if you're not familiar it can be hard to keep up at times, but an enjoyable show none the less.

<http://themusic.com.au/>

The Irish are renowned storytellers and musicians with some of the finest poets to ever live having called themselves Irishmen and women.

As the birthday of W.B. Yeats (13 June), the most famous of the Irish greats, passes, it's a perfect time for a show like 'Ancient Rain'.

'Ancient Rain' (at QPAC in Brisbane 13 June) isn't your typical night of Irish music. Instead, it's staggeringly beautiful Irish poetry set to music, performed by a talented group of musicians.

It seems odd to have Paul Kelly, iconic Australian singer-songwriter, at the helm of a work focused on the great Irish poets. That the man behind 'To Her Door' and a wealth of other sung stories could find himself singing as a rebellious female doctor waging war in Ireland seems, at first glance, like some kind of mix up.

Could he have wandered into the wrong rehearsal and been too polite to own up to the mistake? It takes about three minutes to forget that sense of jarring unfamiliarity. In truth, Kelly's focus on storytelling is what makes him such a great voice for 'Ancient Rain'.

After all every single work here is a story, each of those stories weaving together through the show to create a spellbinding world of loss, love and hope.

'Ancient Rain' isn't the sort of flowery love note to the world you might imagine. Irish history is rife with freedom fights and loss, and the poets featured here have captured that sense of despairing futility in a way that meets the heart like a sucker punch. This may not be the best choice of entertainment on a bad day.

But if you've ever lost faith in poetry as a vehicle for exploring powerful emotion, 'Ancient Rain' is a must see. This is what happens when poetry is shifted away from the dry memory of a classroom and brought to vivid life, its heartbreak palpable and unashamedly laid bare.

The truth is that – though Paul Kelly gets top billing – Camille O'Sullivan owned the stage from the moment she stepped on to it. Her performance was mesmerising, so impossible to look away from that there were times I honestly forgot Paul Kelly was there. This isn't a bad thing. Instead, Kelly took to the part of the straight man – the quiet co-conspirator to O'Sullivan's whirlwind of action and emotion.

Camille O'Sullivan is the sort of singer who can do it all, moving from breathless prayer to rock-goddess growls seemingly effortlessly. There's not much physical storytelling Kelly can do with a guitar in his hand and it's O'Sullivan who moves the show along... quite literally. It's impossible, I think, not to fall in love with her voice and her ability to capture and showcase a wealth of emotions in a way that grips your heart and squeezes it.

In fact every musician on stage was a powerhouse in their own right, each able to work flawlessly together while seeming entirely at ease. It felt, in many ways, like you imagine it feels to sit in an Irish pub – a proper one, not our version – listening to good friends having fun.

I came away from 'Ancient Rain' disappointed that there's no CD I could take home with me, because I would listen to these sung poems again, not just to better understand the poems, but because each work is beautiful in its own right.

The idea that I may only hear these songs once is actually a little heartbreaking. But maybe that's the point.

★★★★★