

DUN LAOGHAIRE FESTIVAL OF WORLD CULTURES

Jane Cornwell enjoys the craic at Ireland's most multicultural festival

It's been decades since a boyish Bob Geldof sat on the dock of Dun Laoghaire bay, wishing he lived somewhere, anywhere, other than there. The picturesque coastal town outside Dublin is now a highly desirable – even proudly multicultural – location, its transformation paralleling Ireland's remarkable shape-shift from the pariah of Europe into its sleek Celtic tiger. To celebrate the fact, Dun Laoghaire council and various cultural communities have been staging a Festival of World Cultures for three days each August since 2001.



The Chinese Theatre Circle demonstrate their extraordinary make-up at one of the many workshops

It's a cornucopia of global delights – music, circus, theatre, dance, club nights, markets, exhibitions, you name it – that has become Ireland's foremost intercultural event.

Two hundred thousand people attended last year's festival. Artists from over 50 countries performed at it. With a programme boasting over 160 events (70% of them free) in 40 venues, choosing what to see was tough. The Indonesian line-dance (*poco poco*)? The traditional Irish *celidh*? A collaboration by agitpropsters Fun-Da-Mental and South Africans The Mighty Zulu Nation? There was Singapore's world-

famous Chinese Theatre Circle, performing a premiere English language Chinese opera. Tuvan-born throat singer, Sainkho Namtchylak, hooking up with guest Ronan O'Snodaigh from Irish band Kíla. Dublin-based Filipino drag from Diva Manila. Guatemalan performer Manu Ramirez and his Rumba Casino. It was all a giant global jigsaw, but somehow the pieces fitted just so.

"We've learnt how important it is to challenge perceptions of international cultures and to reach far and wide with our programme," said the festival's visionary director, Jody Ackland (who has added intercultural speed dating to this year's mix). "One of my proudest moments was standing in the [arts, crafts and foods area] Oxfam Global Village and counting eight languages being spoken around me."

Being of the antipodean persuasion, my first stop was the family-oriented People's Park, an area of rose bushes and bandstands whose grounds had been turned into an Upside Down World in celebration of the southern hemisphere. Here were Australian Aborigine art workshops, storytellers with Maori legends, Balinese puppet shows,



Brazil's DJ Dolores on the wheels of steel



Open wide and say aah – Mighty Zulu Nation



What? You don't expect me to play in front of those people do you? – Dave Watts of Fun-Da-Mental



magic from Pakistan. And everywhere children, their faces painted day-glow colours, their parents kicking back. With punters pouring into the heart of Dun Laoghaire on the DART train service, road closures along the sea front kept the festive ambience at a premium: acrobats, buskers and the occasional living statue dotted pedestrians' journey from the World Dance Plaza to the People's Park and on to Newtownsmith Main Stage – a big, Hyde Park style platform on a green 100 metres from the ocean.

There, on Saturday night, Barcelona's flamenco-meets-hip-hop collective Ojos de Brujo turned out an explosive, up-yours performance (much appreciated by a huge Spanish/Irish contingent), picking up a pace set by a Cork-based Congolese outfit, The Lace. Sunday saw Fun-Da-Mental swagger on to deliver a pounding set that made everyone sit up and take notice. There were other big name acts, of course: up at the Purty Kitchen, Senegalese hip-hoppers Daara J did their 'to-the-left, to-the-right' party piece (and later collaborated with Ojos de Brujo on a track for the latter's current album); Montreal-raised Sufi DJ, Mercan Dede, deployed electronic and folkloric cuts to match the whirling of his female dervish – whose flaring white robe was dramatically illuminated by a single strip of neon.

Famed *sean nós* singer and erstwhile Afro Celts frontman Iarla Ó'Lionáird celebrated the release of his album, *Invisible Fields*, with a mesmerising if rather po-faced performance at the Pavilion Theatre. It was in stark contrast to the previous evening's colourful and often irony-filled Bollywood Night, a hands-in-the-air shindig that featured Mumbai youth dance company Pratap and an indisputable festival highlight, the Bollywood diva Usha Uthup – a sort of Tom Jones in a sari. Singing

Indian pop and classical songs – and the occasional disco anthem – with a silky, knowing voice and a confidence befitting her iconic status in India (she is still the country's only artist to release English language songs internationally), Uthup was a multilingual, singalong sensation. Oh, and the perfect artist for the Pavilion's first-ever stand up concert.

There were a wealth of Irish acts, of course. Cork singer-songwriter, John Spillane, whose songs have been recorded by Christy Moore and Sharon Shannon. Dublin blues impresario Nigel Mooney, wielding jazz-inspired riffs. In the sunny gardens of the Kingston Hotel, across the road from the ferry terminal (from where Geldof eventually crossed the pond to England), sensitive minstrel Emmet Tinley entertained aficionados. As did burgeoning international star Declan O'Rourke – whose blend of Irish traditional music and Motown influences have won him two sell-out Irish tours and accolades aplenty. At Monkstown Parish Church, the progressive/traditional Irish music outfit Kíla collaborated with Ainu [traditional Japanese] musician Oki – a five-string *tonkori* player whose ancient folk melodies and reggae-leaning rhythms made for a fascinating mix.

Festival workshops covered everything from Ainu culture (with Oki) and hip-hop (with Daara J) to tango, Cuban percussion and Asian papermaking. A strand titled Ireland's Voices proved to be coffee mornings with ex-pat communities from Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East – groups which represent the

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changing face of Ireland's demographic. ("This is one of my highlights," said Ackland. "It was an opportunity for various cultural groups to create their own invitation to festival audiences.") There was a Children's Multicultural Book Fair. A giant graffiti art wall mural. Global beats from the roving Mr Whippy Sound System. A Festival of World Cultures, indeed. (This year's line-up includes Ska Cubano, Warsaw Village Band, Etran Finatawa and Emmanuel Jal.)

And every night, upstairs at the 40FT Bar, headline artists joined DJs – El Bario, Leagues O'Toole, Club OA2 – for impromptu live sessions that saw the dance floor heaving and the Brahma beer flowing. On the final evening, after some serious grooving to African/Irish collaboration AfroNova, a nice Dun Laoghaire man I met on the dance floor gave me a piggyback home to my hotel. "Quality artistry is essential but a festival has to be fun," Ackland had said, summing things up rather nicely. ●

**This year's festival is August 25-27 2006
www.festivalofworldcultures.com**

