



An Extraordinary Story

Irish National Opera's development continues apace throughout 2022-23 season with return to the Royal Opera's Linbury Theatre, first Dublin staging of Rossini's *William Tell* in 145 years, and ambitious nationwide touring programme

Olivier Award-winning company presents first performance outside Ireland of Brian Irvine and Netia Jones's *Least Like The Other: Searching for Rosemary Kennedy* with four performances at the Linbury Theatre in January 2023

'This is deeply disturbing art, and deeply moving and humbling. [...] anyone could be left breathless by this,'
The Irish Times, review of *Least Like The Other*, 16 July 2019

Since its launch five years ago, Irish National Opera has attracted international attention with its critically acclaimed productions of established and new works, high artistic values and a determination to be relevant to the broadest possible audience. The company's staging of Vivaldi's *Bajazet*, co-produced with the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, received this year's Olivier Award for Outstanding Achievement in Opera, an accolade that could justifiably be extended to the company as a whole. Its 2022-23 season includes a return to the Royal Opera's Linbury Theatre for the UK premiere of *Least Like The Other: Searching for Rosemary Kennedy*, an INO-commissioned collaboration between composer Brian Irvine and director, designer and video artist Netia Jones (15, 17, 18 & 19 January 2023), Dublin runs of *William Tell* and *Der Rosenkavalier*, and tours throughout Ireland of *Don Pasquale*, *Werther* and *Così fan tutte*.

"We're delighted to be taking *Least Like The Other* to London," comments Irish National Opera's Artistic Director, Fergus Sheil. "We have a great relationship with the Royal Opera and that only deepened when we took *Bajazet* to the Linbury Theatre in February. That was the first staging of a Vivaldi opera at Covent Garden. It proved the strength of Irish National Opera's impact not just in Ireland, where we've achieved so much since our first show in January 2018, but also on the international stage."

Least Like The Other, first performed at the Galway International Arts Festival in 2019, explores the tragedy of Rosemary Kennedy, oldest daughter of Joe and Rose Kennedy and sister of US President John F. Kennedy. Dubbed 'the missing Kennedy' by biographers, Rosemary was starved of oxygen at birth and experienced learning disabilities that affected her behaviour during adolescence and beyond. Joe Kennedy, alarmed by his daughter's violent outbursts and worried that she might cause a scandal detrimental to the high-profile Kennedy dynasty's political aspirations, at first prevented her from leaving home, then arranged for the 23-year-old Rosemary to undergo an enforced lobotomy, a brutal brain operation that left her immobile, unable to speak and with the intelligence of a two-year-old child. She was effectively hidden from the world and institutionalised from 1941 until her death in 2005. Rosemary's lobotomy and its devastating outcome were kept secret from her siblings and wider family for decades.

"Rosemary Kennedy's story has a powerful relevance today," notes Irish National Opera's Artistic Director Fergus Sheil. "Her parents created an image of the family as the ideal model of ambition and achievement in modern America. They were never going to tolerate any blemishes to this picture-perfect world. Brian Irvine and Netia Jones have created a profoundly challenging, quite extraordinary work of experimental musical theatre that is based on found text, including material from newspaper reports, biographies, memoirs, letters, intelligence tests and other sources that have only recently surfaced. Brian's score and Netia's staging take us into a world of heightened reality. Of course it's challenging, but the piece is not bleak – there are moments of humour and lightness there, too."

The opera calls for a singer, two actors and a voice-over artist and contains parts for three improvising musicians and eleven classical players. Fergus Sheil will share conducting duties with Brian Irvine for the work's Linbury Theatre run, with soprano Amy Ní Fhearraigh taking Rosemary's part and actors Stephanie Dufresne and Ronan Leahy adopting an array of different personas and Aoife Spillane-Hinks as voice-over. "It was the men in her story who took control of events," observes Sheil. "Her father decided she should have a lobotomy and the neurologist Walter Freeman, who was one of the procedure's pioneers, carried it out. Even Rose Kennedy, the family matriarch, appears not to have been told about the operation. But she went along with the decision to confine

Rosemary in an institution and keep her condition a secret from the rest of the family. *Least Like The Other* is a tragic tale of male power, abusive social conventions and what happens when society looks the other way. “

Irish National Opera’s commitment to new work is matched by a determination to bring grand opera and repertoire landmarks to venues across Ireland. Its operating model, supported by generous funding from Ireland’s Arts Council, allows the company to be both creative and efficient, conditions not always found together. “We’re light on our feet,” explains Fergus Sheil. “We don’t have a huge number of people on the payroll, but those that are make remarkable things happen.” The company, he notes, is set to give more than sixty performances between July 2022 and June 2023, comprising runs in Dublin, tours around Ireland and outings overseas.

“We work in collaboration with our artistic partners and an array of organisation and venue partners. The model of co-production also works well for us. This flexibility means we can tour widely in Ireland and reach audiences in places that had little or no access to opera before. We had a large audience for Donnacha Dennehy and Enda Walsh’s *The First Child* in Tralee in September with many young faces in the audience, and broke new ground at the Kilkenny Arts Festival in August with the world premiere of Finola Merivale and Jody O’Neill’s *Out of the Ordinary*, the world’s first virtual reality community opera.”

Fergus Sheil will add another landmark to Irish National Opera’s credits this autumn when he conducts a new staging of Rossini’s *William Tell*, the first to be seen in Ireland since 1877. The production, directed by Julien Chavaz and with Canadian baritone Brett Polegato in the title-role, was originated by the company and developed in collaboration with Nouvel Opéra Fribourg. It will receive five performances at the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin (8, 9, 11, 12 & 13 November) and is scheduled for a future production at NOF’s home in Switzerland. Richard Strauss’s *Der Rosenkavalier*, co-produced with Garsington Opera and Santa Fe Opera, will receive four performances at Dublin’s Bord Gáis Energy Theatre (5, 7, 9 & 11 March), with Sheil conducting the work’s first staging in Ireland for thirty-nine years.

Other season highlights, which will be taken on tour to venues all around Ireland, include Donizetti’s evergreen *Don Pasquale*, with Graham Danby in the title role; Massenet’s *Werther*, performed in a new orchestration by Richard Peirson; and Mozart’s *Così fan tutte*, with a fine ensemble cast rich in Irish singers, Anna Devin, Sharon Carty, Robin Tritschler, Majella Cullagh and John Molloy among them.

Irish National Opera understands how to build and sustain an opera company in difficult times. “While we want to remain flexible, we’re already growing as a company,” concludes Fergus Sheil. “Our chorus now works with us for twenty-six weeks per year and our orchestra is doing more and more every year. We receive terrific support from the Arts Council, and have been encouraged by them to collaborate on projects with Irish writers, choreographers, filmmakers, theatre directions and others. There were no opportunities for composers in Ireland to write opera: why would anyone write an opera if nobody was around to perform it? We have changed that and, with help from the Arts Council, are determined to do more new work. And we have no problem in attracting audiences to see it. It’s a very exciting time for Irish National Opera and for opera in Ireland.”

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DOWNLOAD LEAST LIKE THE OTHER PRODUCTION PHOTOS

The information in this press release was correct at the time of sending. Please check the company’s website and social media for the latest updates

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NOTES TO EDITORS

Sunday 15 January 2023, 3pm

Tuesday 17, Wednesday 18, Thursday 19 January 2023, 7.45pm

Linbury Theatre, Royal Opera House, London

[Event page](#)

Brian Irvine, Netia Jones *Least Like The Other: Searching for Rosemary Kennedy*

Fergus Sheil conductor | **Brian Irvine** music, improvisors conductor | **Netia Jones** director, designer, video designer | **Sinéad Wallace** lighting designer | **David Sheppard** sound designer | **Muirne Bloomer** choreographer | **Amy Ní Fhearraigh** singer | **Stephanie Dufresne** actor | **Ronan Leahy** actor | **Aoife Spillane-Hinks** voice over artist, assistant director | **Irish National Opera Orchestra**

Presented in association with the Royal Opera House

Least Like The Other: Searching for Rosemary Kennedy is supported by Culture Ireland

IRISH NATIONAL OPERA

Award-winning company Irish National Opera, which was formed in 2018, performs large scale productions in Dublin, Cork and Wexford, and takes touring productions to venues of all sizes throughout Ireland and beyond. The company's 2022-23 season features nine operas in sixty performances at twenty different venues — nineteen in Ireland plus a return to the Royal Opera House in London with Brian Irvine's *Least Like The Other - Searching for Rosemary Kennedy*.

Irish National Opera responded creatively to the challenges posed by the global pandemic and kept opera alive in Ireland through a series of online concert, events and films. Notably, the company commissioned and produced *20 Shots of Opera*, 20 new short operas for film, a project that garnered enthusiastic reviews from the international press - *The Wall Street Journal* described it as "an exhilarating jaunt through up-to-the-minute lyric creativity".

In February 2022 the company's production of Vivaldi's *Bajazet*, a co-production with the Royal Opera House, brought a work by Venice's most famous composer to the stage of The Royal Opera in London for the first time. *Bajazet* received an Olivier Award for Outstanding Achievement in Opera for conductor Peter Whelan and the Irish Baroque Orchestra. The company's co-production of Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel* with Theatre Lovett and Abbey Theatre won Best Opera at the 2022 Irish Times Irish Theatre Awards. INO and partners Dumbworld received an inaugural Next Stage Grant, awarded by Fedora Platform and Opera Europa with the support of leading global management consulting firm Kearney to develop a Street Art Opera App to accompany Brian Irvine and John McIlduff's *The Scorched Earth Trilogy*. The company has also received two nominations at the 2022 International Opera Awards.

Irish National Opera is funded by The Art Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon.