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Triskel Christchurch - A Pearl in Plain Sight

The Grateful Dead, in "Lost Sailor", sing about a "place you've never been / Maybe a place you've never seen now". The first time I visited Triskel Arts Centre, for a pre-arranged talk and a tour, I wasn't entirely sure if I was in the right place. Or, more correctly, in the right part of the right place.

Then, through the glass doors of the compact Gulpd Café, I spotted a couple of friends sitting with coffee. Gulpd, and its sister Plugd Records upstairs, share space with the Triskel. Decent coffee but Cork does that. It was suggested that I return for lunch at some future date as it has a good reputation.

Stop and ask directions to Triskel Christchurch and you're likely to end up no less ignorant and quite possibly more confused. There are actually two entrances to the Triskel, one on Tobin Street to the left of the aforementioned Gulpd, one around the corner on South Main Street, just to the left of the majestic 18th Century Christchurch.

It's really a toss-up as to which entrance is less conspicuous. The signage is lamentable - if Cork City Council were deliberately trying to hide the venue they could hardly have done better - so a little sense of the geography is in order.

Entering Tobin Street from the Grand Parade side you pass the ultra-modern, glass-walled Soho bar. Meandering past the back of various restaurants and bars that open onto the parallel Washington Street beyond, past the barred windows, your first experience of the Triskel is the expanse of white wall to your left.

First marker is the sign for the Theatre Development Centre overhead, next the circular tube lights looking, perhaps unfairly, somewhat akin to an incomplete set of Olympic rings - I have yet to see those lights in operation - and, finally, the sign with the distinctive Triskel lettering in white on a black background.

This latter banner hangs over Triskel's box office entrance, glass doors flanked by grey wooden doors. Keep walking, past the Gulpd cafe, and you are now on South Main, once the main street of medieval Cork. Take a left and just down on your left you come in turn upon the gates of Christchurch and then those of Bishop Lucey Park.

If you see the Beamish & Crawford brewery to your right you've gone too far. Entering Christchurch grounds and taking the flight of steps just to the left of the neoclassical Georgian columned facade puts you back into Triskel via a little courtyard at the back of Gulpd.

I was not prepared for the inside of Christchurch proper. We entered by climbing the stairs from the foyer between the café and the outer box office. Exquisite stained glass windows - including one of Goliath's nemesis, a memorial to the Great War, and another, the "Townsend" window, a loving tribute from a Cork doctor to his late wife - with those in the apse throwing splatters from Pollock's paintbrushes across the intervening timbers.

The impressive organ and the cage-shaped pulpit. Gently worn solid wooden pews of the box type once prevalent in Protestant churches, each with a latching door. The Scagliola (imitative of decorative, natural stone) columns; overhead the Gallery formerly reserved for those greater good; the corporation box and William's coat of arms, proclaiming "God and my right", overlooking the central aisle and directly above Christchurch's front entrance.

Cork County Council purchased the deconsecrated Christchurch in 1979 and it then became home to the Cork Archives Institute until 2005. In 2008 Cork City Council started on a multi-million Euro restoration which included the integration of Christchurch with the Triskel Arts Centre next door. Completed in April of 2011 Christchurch then became a multipurpose venue passed to Triskel to manage.

A principal purpose since has been as the default Cork home for arthouse and world cinema. In addition to participating in the larger Cork Film Festival, Triskel hosts the Twisted Celluloid Film Festival, with a programme that can best be described as an homage to the cult horror genre, both contemporary and retro.

I love movies but I confess horror is no longer my thing; not since I was a kid and we tried to impress one another with our relative mastery of fear. I have a particular fondness for the classic black and white gems of my youth, and also for French cinema. Having unavoidably missed the opportunity to catch a Wilder masterpiece, "Some Like It Hot", I consoled myself with a Saturday night ticket to "Paper Souls", billed as a French romantic comedy.

Arriving a few minutes early I picked up a glass (of the unbreakable kind) of a passable red in Gulpd to take with me into the cinema. A wonderful idea. Craft beers are also available and allowed to pass. There was a slight delay before the upstairs Christchurch doors were opened and then it was a matter of picking a pew and settling in. There were just sixteen others in attendance, most my age or older. Perhaps twenty total by the time the movie got underway. Disappointing for Triskel I'm sure but not, I confess, for me as a full house does nothing for a movie except subtract.

The seats of the hardwood pews, covered though they are in red cushions, are not the most forgiving. The pews must stay so some kind soul might look at a cushion upgrade. My weak back was protesting constantly near the movie's end and would certainly not have forgiven me a double bill. The screen, which dropped from above the altar, was perfect and the sound was superb. There was some late noise bleed from outside the church - I resolved on leaving that it was from the packed Gulpd downstairs - made more noticeable because of the low key nature of the movie. That quibble aside, Christchurch makes for a wonderful movie theatre.

This piece is not intended as a movie review but I should just add that "Paper Souls" disappointed. Funeral oration writer Paul (Stéphane Guillon) and widow Emma (Julie Gayet) who hires him to try and connect with her son Adam, could not save a muddled script that did not know what it wanted to be - romantic comedy (that chemistry did not work in any case), fantasy, allegory, tragedy or farce. The director's attempted visual homage to Paris fell woefully short of Allen's far superior "Midnight In Paris".

When asked about my first brief experience of Triskel Christchurch my perfunctory response had been that it felt somewhat inaccessible, literally and figuratively, a place where history was obscured by an excess of formality and beauty masked by a cool self-regard. The visitor an entirely unnecessary augmentation. In a city that

consistently punches above its weight it appeared almost as if Triskel had declined to join the fray, detaching itself from, and indifferent to, the madding crowd.

But my considered opinion is a contrary one. To the soul of my perpetual stranger it is a warm and welcoming space with the mix of bright white walls, dark wood and glass creating a breathing space larger than the volume contained, and a comfort that eschews the precious for the older, the settled, the familiar. While in artistic terms successfully accommodating the emerging alongside the established. If it stands aloof it is only because it stands apart. A pearl in plain sight.

And Christchurch proper, where a film soundtrack can make a still sacred space reverberate with laughter or echo the almost inaudible sigh of sense memory. I have been told that the live acoustics are wonderful - I will hold out for that magical meeting of musician and moment. In the meantime I will most certainly return for another movie.

As with much of what is worth discovering, Triskel must be actively sought out. I suggest starting with a tour which gives a real sense of the space and allows you to easily imagine all the other possibilities - music, cinema, visual arts, literature, weddings and on. The tour is inexpensive and only an hour of your time. Once you've absorbed a little of Christchurch's past you'll want to return for a taste of Triskel's present.