



Yellow Asylum &
Kilkenny Arts Festival

CUSTOM OF THE COAST

An Operatic Conjuring
in One Act

Kamala Sankaram / Paul Muldoon

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Performers

Anchal Dhir

– *Soprano*

Michelle O'Rourke

– *Mezzo-soprano*

Danny O'Mahony

– *Accordion*

Crash Ensemble

Aoife Ni Bhriain – *Violin I*

Maria Ryan – *Violin II*

Lisa Dowdall – *Viola*

Kate Ellis – *Cello*

Composer

Kamala Sankaram

Librettist

Paul Muldoon

Director & Designer

Alan Gilsenan

Musical Director

Kate Ellis

Lighting Designer

Matt Burke

Costume Designer

Sinéad Lawlor

Graphic Designer

John Foley

Producers

Catherine Nunes &

Marina Rafter

Production Manager

Eoin Hannaway

A note on the libretto by Paul Muldoon

There are two characters in this story whose spirits and narratives connect across time.

The first is the County Cork-born pirate **Anne Bonny** (1700 – 1782). Like many women pirates, she dresses as a man. Her sentence of death by hanging is commuted because of her being pregnant.

The second character is **Savita Halappanavar** (1981 – 2012), an Indian-born dentist who dies in Galway of sepsis after being denied an abortion. The Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act 2013 was signed into law as a result of her death.

Other characters mentioned include Anne Bonny's lover, '**Calico Jack**' **Rackham** (1682 – 1720), the captain of a stolen English sloop in which Bonny and himself are eventually captured. Calico Jack is hanging in Port Royal, Jamaica, and his body displayed on a gibbet.

Mention is also made of **Mary Read** (1690 – 1721), another member of Rackham's crew who dresses as a man. With her friend Anne Bonny, she 'pleads the belly' and, under English Common Law, is given a stay of execution. Mary Read dies of childbirth fever in a Jamaican prison. The fate of the historical Anne Bonny isn't entirely clear.

The title refers most immediately to the 18th century code of honor among pirates though it also refers ironically to the legal and ethical issues raised by abortion in 21st century Ireland.

The stories of Anne Bonny and Savita Halappanavar are presented in what seems like parallel until they intersect to devastating effect. One stands as a commentary on the other.

CUSTOM OF THE COAST BIOGS

Kamala Sankaram

Praised as “strikingly original” (*NY Times*), composer Kamala Sankaram moves freely between the worlds of experimental music and contemporary opera. Her work has been performed internationally at venues including Dutch National Opera, Los Angeles Opera, Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center. She has been artist-in-residence at the Glimmerglass Festival, the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, and is currently in residence at Minnesota Opera. As a biracial Indian American and trained sitarist, Kamala has also drawn on Indian classical music in many of her works, including *Thumbprint*, *A Rose*, *Monkey and Francine in the City of Tigers*, *Jungle Book* and the forthcoming *The Many Deaths of Laila Starr*. Also known for pushing the boundaries of form and style, she has created an opera for the trees of Prospect Park (as winner of the 2021 Creative Time Open Call), the world’s first virtual reality opera, an augmented reality music walk for Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx, and a techno-noir featuring live datamining of the audience, among other pieces. Kamala is the leader of Bombay Rickey, an award-winning operatic Bollywood surf ensemble. Dr. Sankaram holds a PhD from the New School and is currently a member of the composition faculty at the Mannes School of Music in New York City. www.kamalasankaram.com

A Word on the Music

When Paul first asked me to collaborate on *Custom of the Coast*, it had only been two months since the United States Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade, thus removing the 50-year-old precedent that a woman has a constitutional right to an abortion. I was already familiar with both Anne Bonny and Savita Halappanavar— particularly Savita since much of my Indian family lives in Bengaluru, the capital of Karnataka. So, there was no question in my mind – the subject matter was too important not to say yes.

Paul's libretto draws connections between Indian and Irish culture, and I have tried to do the same with the music. Indian and Irish music are both modal, so the piece is structured around scales that are functionally equivalent in both traditions. For example, the Dorian mode corresponds to the Hindustani raga Kafi. For *Custom of the Coast*, I've chosen ragas that match the emotional trajectory of the piece. We begin in Kafi, which is lighter, associated with love, and used in many ghazals. By the end of the piece, we've moved to Todi, a more complicated and mournful raga. To create the world of Anne Bonny, the piece is punctuated by interludes featuring Irish traditional music, wonderfully realized in this production by Danny O'Mahony. As the trajectories of Anne and Savita overlap, raga and reel meet, *Róisín Dubh* is paired with the Carnatic *Enna*

Thavam Seithanai, and the two women's voices combine in power and beauty.

Anchal Dhir

Anchal Dhir (Savita Halappanavar) is a South Asian performer based in New York City, thrilled to be making her international debut in *Custom of the Coast*. She was recently seen Off-Broadway as Donna Anna in Mozart's *Don Giovanni: A Rock Opera*. Other credits include *Dominique* in *The Baker's Wife* at The Flea Theater, *Mabel* in *The Pirates of Penzance*, and *Susanna* in *Le Nozze di Figaro* at Ithaca College.

Anchal is a two-time Encouragement Award recipient (NYC District) in the Metropolitan Opera Laffont Competition. She is a proud graduate of the William Esper Studio, where she completed the two-year professional actor training program under the wise hands of Bruce McCarty. She holds a B.M. in Vocal Performance from Ithaca College ('23).

She is deeply grateful to this wonderful team for the opportunity.

Michelle O'Rourke

Michelle O'Rourke is a singer based in Dublin, Ireland. Michelle combines her background in Baroque music

with an adventurous eclecticism and an interest in interdisciplinary work. Michelle is passionate about the commissioning and performance of new vocal music. She has worked closely with many Irish composers, including Ann Cleare, Andrew Hamilton, Simon O'Connor, Karen Power, Benedict Schlepper-Connolly, and Garrett Sholdice. Notable releases include Andrew Hamilton: Music for People (NMC), Left Behind: Songs of the 1916 Widows (Ergodos). Michelle contributes vocals to the critically acclaimed album Inside Out (Genuin), by violinist Diamanda La Berge Dramm. Her most recent album, Folk Songs with Ficino Ensemble, has also met with praise: "O'Rourke's contributions dazzle with unaffected clarity." (The Guardian) Michelle is ever fascinated by the seemingly endless expressive facility of the human voice; how singers have been centric to ritual performance for centuries, and how we continue as performers to evolve the interpretative and performative role of voice.

ALAN GILSENAN

Alan Gilsenan is an award-winning Irish writer, filmmaker and theatre director. His diverse and eclectic body of work extends across many mediums.

His latest films includes **The Days of Trees**, a reflection on trauma and memory, which won the 2024 IFTA award for best feature documentary; **Ghosts of Baggotonia**, a film-poem that combines personal

memory and the literary ghosts of bohemian Dublin; and **The Irish Question**, a mediation on the Northern Ireland 'Troubles' and the possibilities for a united Ireland.

His theatre work includes John Banville's **The Book of Evidence** for the Kilkenny Arts Festival/Gate Theatre, Samuel Beckett's **Footfalls** for the Gate Theatre/Barbican: Tom McIntyre's **What Happened Bridgie Cleary** for the Abbey Theatre and **BECKETT | POEMS** for the Beckett Festival / Arts Over Borders.

Danny O'Mahony

Danny O'Mahony is widely regarded as one of the finest traditional Irish musicians, known for his exceptional talent and deep commitment to preserving and innovating Irish music. Originating from Ballyduff in North County Kerry, Danny's musical journey began in his childhood, playing alongside the older generation of musicians in his community. This rich foundation helped cultivate his keen ear and a profound appreciation for the nuances of traditional Irish music.

Danny's illustrious career is marked by numerous accolades, including Junior and Senior All-Ireland titles, as well as a Master's degree in Performance from the prestigious University of Limerick. In 2013, his mastery of the button accordion earned him recognition as the

Top Button Accordionist by the Irish Music Association in America.

His debut album, 'In Retrospect' (2011), was met with critical acclaim, showcasing not only his technical prowess but also his emotive style. The album features collaborations with esteemed musicians like Patsy Broderick and Cyril O'Donoghue, and reflected his ability to weave personal narratives and emotions through music. Following this success, Danny partnered with renowned concertina player Mícheál Ó Raghallaigh in 2012 to release 'As it Happened,' an intimate duet album that garnered the Instrumental Album of the Year award from the LiveIreland Music Awards.

In 2009, Danny resurrected the Shannon Vale Céilí Band, originally founded in 1959 by fiddler Dr. Mick Sweeney. Under Danny's leadership, the band achieved remarkable milestones, including winning the All-Ireland Senior Céilí Band title at Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann in 2011 and performing at Áras an Uachtaráin for President Michael D. Higgins on St. Patrick's Day in 2014. Their debut album, 'Shannon's Lovely Vale,' further highlights Danny's dedication to fostering traditional music within a communal setting.

Crash Ensemble

Crash Ensemble is Ireland's leading new music ensemble; a group of world-class musicians who play the most adventurous, ground-breaking music of today.

Amazingly ordinary people doing extraordinary things - Crash is innovative, adventurous and ambitious.

Led by cellist and Artistic Director, Kate Ellis and Principal Conductor, Ryan McAdams, the ensemble commissions, collaborates, explores, investigates and experiments with a broad spectrum of music creators and artistic collaborators: 'We love to innovate, with quality always at the heart of everything we do. We are passionate about the music we play. We create experiences; exploring new ways of presenting music and bringing our audiences on new adventures. Community for us is key – our community inspires us to create and experiment more. We value our audiences and our connection with them.'

Crash perform both in Ireland and internationally. The ensemble's music is available on their own label, Crash Records and they have recordings on Nonesuch, Cantaloupe, NMC, Ergodos and Bedroom Community labels.

Many well-known artists from diverse musical backgrounds have performed with the ensemble; Terry Reilly, Gavin Friday, Dawn Upshaw, Diamanda La Berge Dramm, Laurie Anderson, Lisa Hannigan, Íarla Ó Lionáird (The Gloaming), Bryce Dessner (The National), Richard Reed Parry (Arcade Fire), Sam Amidon and Beth Orton.

As well as performing throughout Ireland, Crash regularly perform internationally, with appearances in

the last few years at the Edinburgh International Festival, The Royal Opera House (London), The Barbican (London), Carnegie Hall (NYC) The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (Washington DC), Virginia Tech (Virginia), GAIDA Festival (Lithuania) and residencies at The Huddersfield Contemporary Music festival (UK) and Princeton University (NJ).

Crash Ensemble is funded by the Arts Council of Ireland and Dublin City Council, is a resident ensemble at the National Concert Hall in Dublin, Ireland and at Kilkenny Arts Festival, Ireland.

Aoife Mairead Ní Bhriain

Born in Dublin, to a family of musicians, Aoife Ní Bhriain has established herself as one of the most versatile musicians of her generation. Thanks to her musical heritage combined with her classical studies she has collaborated and performed with musicians such as pianist Eliso Virsaladze, fiddle player Martin Hayes, violinist Mariana Sirbu, Welsh harpist Catrin Finch, jazz guitarist Wolfgang Muthspiel and Oscar winning actor Tim Robbins. She has been guest co-leader of the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland, Guest Leader of Crash Ensemble, Stargaze Ensemble, Concorde Ensemble and has also co-led the Scottish Chamber Orchestra.

She is a member of the avant garde string quintet Wooden Elephant as well as the Goodman Trio with

whom she has explored the manuscripts of the music collected around Ireland in the 1800's by Canon James Goodman. Since 2021 Aoife has joined forces with Welsh harpist Catrin Finch and in October 2023 they released their debut album "Double You" to critical acclaim. Future projects include a debut album release "Cosán Casta" with pianist Cormac McCarthy in November 2025.

Winner of the RTÉ Best Folk Instrumentalist of the Year, the Camerata Ireland Young Musician Award and the prestigious Bonn Óir Sean Uí Riada in 2010, Aoife has also won seven All Ireland titles as well as prizes in international violin and chamber music competitions. Most recently Aoife has qualified for the semi finals of the International Bach Competition 2022 in Leipzig and was awarded the Next Generation Award from the Arts Council of Ireland. In 2024 Aoife was shortlisted for Best Folk Album for her album with Catrin Finch in the RTÉ Radio 1 Folk Awards.

Recent performances include Shostakovich Violin Concerto no.1 with the Sudwestdeutsche Philharmonie Konstanz and the Bach Double Concerto for Violin and Oboe with the Orlando Philharmonic alongside some of her own arrangements and compositions. In 2025 Aoife is the Kaleidoscope Series Artist in Residence in Dublin as well as the commissioned composer in Stúideo Cuan and recipient of the Charlie Lennon Commission award.

Aoife has a particular interest in solo violin works and curated a performance on the solo violin works of J.S. Bach and the improvisations of acclaimed Dublin fiddle player Tommie Potts on whom she has co-written a book to be released by the Irish Traditional Music Archives in 2025.

She graduated with first class honours from the Hochschule fur Musik und Theater Leipzig in 2018 and plays on a violin by J.B. Vuillaume on generous loan as well as a Jurgen Manthey violin purchased through the Music Network Music Capital Scheme.

Lisa Dowdall

An innovative and versatile musician, Lisa Dowdall has focused her career on chamber music in all its forms from early music through classical to hardcore contemporary, experimenting with new musical genres, art forms and venues.

Lisa has performed as a chamber musician, recitalist, and in chamber orchestras throughout Europe, the United States, South America, Australia and Asia. She has performed at The Edinburgh Festival, BBC Proms, Canberra International Music Festival, Ban on a Can Marathon, with residencies at Huddersfield International Contemporary Music Festival, Princeton University, Montclair State University and Aldeburgh

Residencies. Performance highlights include performances in Carnegie Hall (USA), Kennedy Centre (USA), Barbican (UK) as well as live radio broadcasts on BBC Radio 3, Lyric FM, ABC and WNYC.

Since 2007, Lisa has been a member of the internationally acclaimed new music group Crash Ensemble, collaborating with composers and artists from all genres and disciplines, premiering works written for the ensemble by Terry Riley, David Lang, Michael Gordon, Nico Muhly and Donnacha Dennehy. Crash Ensemble can be heard on recordings by labels NMC, Cantaloupe, Nonesuch and Bedroom Community.

Lisa's passion for authentic performance has led her to explore the world of the baroque viola and viola d'amore, performing and recording with the Irish Baroque Orchestra, Camerata Kilkenny, Ensemble Marsyas, Spackling Band, Sestina and Resurgam. On the viola d'amore Lisa has merged her baroque and contemporary experiences, collaborating with composers, improvisers, poets, dancers, singer song writers and film scorers.

In addition to her teaching position at the Royal Irish Academy of Music, Lisa is an Arts Council Creative Associate and has taught on courses for the South African National Youth Orchestra, MA in Classical String

Performance - University of Limerick, Trinity College Dublin and the Irish Youth Baroque Orchestra.

Maria Ryan

Maria, a versatile violinist and singer from Limerick, masters both classical and folk genres, captivating global audiences with her exceptional talent. As a member of various groups including Ireland's leading contemporary group Crash Ensemble, she graces prestigious stages with the Irish National Opera, Wexford Opera and has travelled worldwide as singer and fiddle player with renowned piper Carlos Nunez. Maria's versatility extends to collaborations with Andrea Bocelli, Hozier, Lisa Hannigan, Kodaline and others, seamlessly blending virtuosity with diverse styles. Renowned for folk albums with bands Strung and Lucia and Maria, she showcases unique interpretations of traditional melodies. With electrifying performances and a passion for pushing musical boundaries, Maria inspires with her unwavering dedication to her craft. Her contributions as a session musician add depth to her artistic repertoire, while her leadership in contemporary Irish music solidifies her position as a prominent figure in the industry. Through her captivating arrangements and dynamic stage presence, Maria continues to enchant audiences worldwide. She performs on a Claude Lebet violin, supported by Music Network's Music Capital Scheme,

funded by The Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.

Matt Burke

Matt Burke is a lighting designer for theatre, opera and dance.

Recently he has designed “*La Vera Costanza*” for The Royal Irish Academy of Music; Once Off Productions & Galway International Arts Festival “*Unspeakable Conversations*” at GIAF 2024; and Mufutau Yusuf’s (Luail) contemporary dance duo “*IMPASSE*”, having its UK premiere at Sadler’s Wells Dance Theatre in November 2024 and touring internationally in 2025. He has worked extensively with The National Irish Language Theatre, An Taibhdhearc, at the Galway International Arts Festival from 2013 to 2018.

In 2019 he graduated with an MFA in Lighting design from The Lir Academy, Trinity College Dublin.

Sinéad Lawlor

Sinéad Lawlor is a costume designer based in Dublin. Her work includes *The Maestro and The Mosquita* and *An Attempt to Talk with the Beginning of the World* (DFF 2024 Theatre Lovett/Anna Newell Theatre Adventures), *Warrior* (Karen Egan, DTF

2023), *Disappearing Islands* (Performance Corporation, directed by Jo Mangan), *The Tin Soldier* (Gate Theatre and Theatre Lovett); *Caged* (FemmeBizarre); *A Handful of Dreams* (Galway International Arts Festival) & *House!* (Fidget Feet Aerial Dance Theatre); associate designer to Joan O'Clery for both Landmark/Irish National Opera's *The First Child* (Dublin Theatre Festival and GIAF) and *Kin* (AMC and RTÉ, series 1).

Other work includes *Bingo Wings* (Fidget Feet), for which she received a 2020 Irish Times Theatre Award Best Costume nomination. She Co-Costume Designed on *Dancing With the Stars* Series 7.

Sinéad is also a visiting costume tutor at the Lir Academy on their BA and MFA programmes.

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