

REVIEWS

Earagail Arts Festival Co Donegal

Kate Chambre

A Donegal audience was transported to the Malian desert during a pioneering musical collaboration between one of Africa's most gifted musicians and Hothouse Flowers frontman Liam Ó Maonlaí.

It was Grammy award-winner Toumani Diabaté and Ó Maonlaí's first-ever musical union in Ireland, and without doubt a highlight of this year's 10-day Earagail Arts Festival, which culminates tomorrow.

From start to finish, Ó Maonlaí, the Malian kora (21-string harp-lute) maestro and his five-piece ensemble had the packed house at Letterkenny's An Grianán Theatre, ranging from toddlers to 80-year-olds, captivated.

It was a bare-footed Ó Maonlaí who took the stage first, starting with a jig in seven parts, displaying an impressive versatility on the whistle, bodhrán, piano, harp, aboriginal percussion sticks and vocals, throughout.

Ó Maonlaí first came across Diabaté several years ago, after receiving a CD of his music from Australian musician Steve Cooney who made a guest appearance at the concert playing the didgeridoo, illustrating primeval music at its best.

The second half of the concert saw Diabaté, who comes from many generations of kora players, and his group, take centre stage, ending with a much-anticipated performance with Liam Ó Maonlaí.

Diabaté, renowned for collaborations with artists such as Björk and the bluesman Taj Mahal, played material from *The Mandé Variations*, his first solo, all acoustic kora album.

It was evident from the outset, however, that his compatriots, on vocals, drum-kit, electric bass, electric guitar, piano, flute and percussion, although extremely talented, only served to detract from the melodious simplicity of his kora playing.

The Earagail Arts Festival, included drive-in film screenings on alternate nights of *ET - The Extra-Terrestrial* and *The Blair Witch Project* at Ards Forest Park, Creeslough.

With car radios tuned into the huge movie screen, it was apparent that the hundreds of people in attendance relished the experience - especially those in their souped-up vehicles.

As darkness fell on the second night, one or two pranksters attempted to re-enact scenes from *The Blair Witch Project*. "Josh, Josh where are you?" they shrieked from the forest, adding to the intensity of the cult horror film. Moments later, the clank of car doors could be heard as spooked-out drivers pressed their central locking systems.

After a two-night run in Buncrana and Ballybofey, Dunfanaghy's Holy Trinity Parish Hall saw English actors Andrew Jones and Ciaran Murtagh, of Blacksheep Productions, leave an audience in stitches during their theatrical comedy *I, Lear*.

From Alan "Gordon" Bennett to Bertolt Brecht, William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens to Tennessee Williams, eccentric thespians Hugh Carpenter (Jones) and Chester Blenheim (Murtagh) conducted a tongue-in-cheek theatrical master-class on the history of theatre.