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Review: The Beauty Queen of Leenane

By Liam Murphy. Published on Friday, November 5th, 2010 at 8:15 am

Ben Barnes production of Martin McDonagh's award-winning play, The Beauty Queen of Leenane is a powerful, chilling and strong re-take on a play that has often been described as dark and a black comedy. This production at The Theatre Royal, before going on a national tour has a savagery and a brutality we don't expect from classic Irish plays and this is a classic and this is a classic production.

In his programme notes, Director's Welcome, he describes the work as a cross between John Millington Synge and Quentin Tarantino and that is what the audience got. There is the fine repetitive melodious phrasing – soft Irish, way of saying things and the brooding intensity and visceral explosion of a “slasher movie.”

The savage cuts in and out of Jamie Beamish's sound Design linked **with a harsh lighting design from Thomas Hase** in a much understated if not ordinary set design from Todd Rosenthal sets the edgy tone that terrible things are going to happen as bile hatred, madness and loneliness take centre stage.

This is measured, considered creative work and Barnes shows his assuredness with top-class casting of the four characters. Each fits the intent and delivers that vision with memorable performances.

Conor MacNeill, whom I remember from a powerful Corcadorca production Plasticine, was great as the impatient Ray Dooley. Michael power as the easy-going, looking for comfort if not love, Pato Dooley brought to the role a poetry and humanity that I hadn't noticed before in other productions. His opening Act Two monologue was a tour-de-force.

Gillian Hanna was wonderful in a vicious birdlike way as the spiteful Mag Folan, the part made famous by the late Anna Manahan. There was a sharpness in her voice, a wheedling nasty cunning and an agility when needed as she cowered under a table after a most horrific scene. Jenni Ledwell was mesmerizing and scary as Maureen the titular Beauty Queen, doomed to no life in a desolate place beset by hopes and madness. What a performance she gave, at times angry, bitter, sexy, vulnerable, resolute and then crazy as a scratching hen.

What a triumph for The Theatre Royal and the Imagine Festival.