



Heidelberg Theatre's "A Skull In Connemara"
Photo by Patricia Tyler.

A SKULL IN CONNEMARA

by Martin McDonagh
Heidelberg Theatre Company
Directed by Justin Stephens
Reviewed by Barry O'Neill - 17 July 2009

Those familiar with Martin McDonagh's work will recognise this play as the second in his Leenane Trilogy, the first being *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and the last *The Lonesome West*. All portray the tediousness and predictability of life in a remote rural Irish village, which breeds inane conversations, irreverent relationships, and violent outbursts.

The play opened with a two minute animated film illustrating back story (credited to Neil Sanders), twin projected onto the back wall of the theatre and visible through the murky outline of the set. This was a creative and atmospheric multimedia opening, although the animated style and accompanying dirge-like music foreshadowed a tone and

direction for the play that, to my mind, was not congruent with the writer's intent. Lights up revealed the skeleton of a dreary grim cottage room, sparsely furnished with a huge symbolic Celtic cross acting as a chimney above the grey fireplace. Two moodily lit giant trees either side downstage provided additional atmosphere particularly when the stage was revolved to reveal a bleak eerie graveyard, with the cross again dominant. Both sets (design by Justin Stephens and Wendy Drowley) were convincing although the shallow depth of the graveyard forced actors to move somewhat unnaturally in the limited space. Jason Bovaird's skilled lighting design added depth and dramatic effect to the atmosphere, using some startling effects to emphasise particular elements of the plot. Justin Stephens' sound design was boldly original but at times sounded somewhat melodramatic.

The cottage belongs to Mick Dowd, a lonely character who disinters graves every autumn to make room for more dead souls. This year one of the graves holds Mick's wife who was killed in a car crash seven years ago while he was driving 'under the influence'. Or had Mick already murdered her when he took her in the car? Then again, when Mick digs to his wife's grave why is her body missing? These 'mysteries' are as close to a plot as Mr. McDonagh writes.

Paul Kennedy gave us a brooding, dominating Mick Dowd in a characterisation that to my mind concentrated heavily on the threat in the man, but ignored the essential Irish-ness that is a cornerstone of the writer's inimitable style. More understatement in the first act would have heightened his menace in the second. He was also hampered by a guttural accent that was often difficult to understand.

In contrast, Sandy Green's sublime interpretation of Dowd's piteous loving neighbour Maryjohnny Rafferty was totally natural and convincing. Her ability to vary delivery and presence, together with an excellent lilting brogue, brought realism to her loveable but slightly devious and niggling character.

Maryjohnny's two grandsons are very different men. The young Mairtin played by Brian Farrell, is a loutish, nervy young man who is prone to make unwitting disclosures about past events. Mr Farrell maintained a frenetic pace and was particularly convincing when dropping clangers then allowing the penny to drop at just the right moment.

Nick Walter took the role of Thomas Hanlon, a dimwitted policeman whose greatest wish is to have a murder committed on his patch. Mr Walter's stage presence and accent allowed him to play the role competently, but he always seemed unnatural in a spotless policeman's uniform.

Director Justin Stephens chose to make Dowd's suspected murder of his wife the dominant theme in this interpretation, and used dramatic effects in acting, set, sound and lighting effectively to focus on this issue. Whilst this produced a creditable 'murder mystery', I suggest the production could have been more carefully crafted to bring to life the quintessentially Irish rural existence and unique humour that is reflected in Martin McDonagh's writing.

GUMSHOE

by Simon Denver and Donald Woodward
Eltham Little Theatre Youth Theatre
Directed by Gayle Poor and Lois Fleming
Reviewed by Richard Burman - 11 July 2009

Gumshoe is a rollicking spoof on the detective style of Raymond Chandler books but which takes the story from Chicago around the world and back again. It concerns a kidnapped professor, a missing jewel and kidnapped orphans. It takes us to exotic places - Casablanca, Macau, Istanbul, Rio - as well as the sleazy side of Chicago. Gayle Poor and Lois Fleming directed their talented young cast of 28 performers with a deft hand which ensured the audience had a very enjoyable night of excitement, laughter and, above all, good-hearted spoof.

Nick Fleming led the cast with a very likeable performance as the seedy PI, Mac Hunter. He played his Humphrey Bogart type character with a confidence and an assurance which quickly set the style of the musical and immediately established a link with the audience with his twinkle-in-the-eye personality. His cohort in the adventure was Feta Steele, the hardbitten newspaper journalist, confidently played by Sarah Klink who matched Nick Fleming's performance step for step.

A supporting role of Chucky Charles, the radio/television newsreader, was nicely played by Nathan Kerwood, who is to be commended on the clarity of the delivery of his lines. A special note commendation should also be made for Llaaneath Poor who was the Chanteuse in a seedy dive. Not only did she sing the song extremely well but it was nice caricature of that sort of role. Llaaneath also was the stage manager of the production, who led a very efficient crew as the multiple set changes were carried out with a minimum of fuss.

Keanu Quaresma was a very funny kidnapped professor and Amanda Middleditch suitably wicked as Svetlana Von Bizarro. Emma Nixon, Shanti Whitten and Tasha Johnson played Polly, Dolly and Molly - a sort of travelling Andrews Sisters - who popped up all over the world. Among the other actors who performed well were Thomas Boon, as the Policeman Becker, Ben Fleming, who doubled Abdul and Francois, and Ryan Shadbolt, as Carlos. It is not possible to mention the whole cast but they all created their little roles very well with lovely touches which were picked up clearly by those members of the audience who remember this style of story and song well.

Virginia Donnelly led a large team of costume makers who worked very hard to produce a huge number of items representing countries from all over the world. They are to be congratulated.

It is nice to see young people learning the craft of the theatre and at Eltham they are obviously being trained well. There was an air of confidence about all the cast, irrespective of age, and basic elements such as projection and when to stand still were clearly being instilled. All in all this was a very happy night at the theatre, enjoyed by a very appreciative audience.