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National Operatic & Dramatic Association London Region

Society : Shinfield Players
Production : The Beauty Queen of Leenane
Date : Wednesday 7th June
Venue : Shinfield Players Theatre
Report by : Nick Humby

Show Report

Overall Production Impression

Martin McDonagh's dark and challenging plays set in Ireland provide a wonderful opportunity for amateur societies to show off their production and acting skills with their strong sense of location, distinctive accents and requiring careful management of the most unpleasant moments of drama. Handled badly this could be awkward and uncomfortable for cast and audience to be part of, done well the drama's clever combination of comic elements and shocking drama provide a powerful piece of theatre.

Shinfield players pulled off a remarkably fine production of the play on its opening night. It was very sad for all concerned to hear that they lost two subsequent performances due to illness and I hope the cast recovered and were able to perform it again to reap the rewards and applause for all their efforts.

The detailed set created the run-down old cottage in rural Leenane in Connemara in Eire with a good-looking sink and wood burning stove and well positioned furnishings that made a perfect setting for the action and were used very well in the direction. It successfully created a sense of isolation for the



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mother and daughter and their relationships were wonderfully acted by the cast.

Cast

The central character of Mag was played brilliantly by **Liz Carroll** with a beautifully paced delivery of lines, fine accent and well-judged looks and reactions to the setting and visitors to the cottage. The simmering evil malcontent of this old lady abusing her daughter was wonderfully expressed with just the slightest movement in her rocking chair or her unsteady shuffling around the room and glances at the doors and window. Her manipulative behaviour is shocking but somehow, we still feel a little (but only a little) sympathy for her fearful loneliness and isolation. Even the spiteful way she says “Kimberley” conveys her distaste and ungratefulness for her daughters’ efforts. Her previous acting experience shone through in this performance.

Rebecca Douglas as the daughter Maureen has an equally challenging role which calls for a greater range of emotions and more nuanced delivery as she reveals the hidden depths to her character. Whether reluctantly being bullied into serving her mother, showing disgust at her mothers’ actions , seducing Pato or plotting her revenge it calls for a wide range of acting and sustained Irish accent. In less skilled hands this could become unconvincing or hammy, but Rebecca made it believable, and each revelation added to our sympathy for her predicament and understanding (but still shocked) at her ultimate revenge.



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Matt Chishick's role as Ray, the messenger, sent to the cottage is an important cameo and he conveyed well the hesitancy, naivety and mistrust towards Mag on each visit, hinting enough in his looks about his doubts and uncertainties. The business with the poker was well handled in an important foreshadowing scene and his double checking through the door and window were perfectly timed for comic effect.

Neil Padgen as Pato is seemingly the most sympathetic character from his drunken entrance (although he did seem to sober up quite quickly) to his reaction to the seduction and ultimate embarrassing next morning's scene. His powerful and emotional Act 2 monologue from a bedsit in England was convincingly heartfelt and beautifully sets up the final scenes. He convinced that he did feel Maureen was the Beauty Queen, making the ultimate revelations all the more poignant.

Creatives

Director **Adam Wells** and assistant **Mark Read** did an excellent job with this fine cast using the space in the cottage room well with the position of the rocking chair, table and single armchair used to reinforce relationships and tensions. There was a good balance between the comedic elements and the most unpleasant behaviours, and the action was well paced throughout. I felt the critical horrific scene of the hand scalding was less effective as both actors had their back to the audience and Maureen's manhandling of Mag to the stove looked contrived. This moment of absolute terror and horror was as a result slightly underplayed.

The stage management under **Sam Turner** ensured a smooth-running show with the bedsit neatly set up during the interval and a glimpse of the appropriately coloured contents of the potty seen as it was poured into the sink! The food elements worked very well.

The lighting and sound design by **Pete Ashton and Matt Chishick** was generally very good with wonderful lighting for the final scene catching Maureen beautifully and evocatively while leaving Mag in the half light upstage. The fire sound effect was subtle but effective each time the door opened but I could not see a flame effect which would have been good to see flare when items were added in. The radio effect was weak implying interference without being able to hear the content.

The set by the **Shinfield team** was a good box set with some appropriate looking wall hangings including the crucifix, and although the walls were grubby, they might have been decorated with hints of brickwork or crumbling plaster. The front door looked like a modern internal door rather than an old rural front door and rattled a little too much when slammed. The view outside the rear window onto a white wall might have been dressed more with a branch or leaves to provide more depth and a countryside setting.

The programme by **Caroline White** was attractive and useful with a helpful scene list and descriptor, good rehearsal photos and a good comic touch in the bio's in keeping with the play.



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I had seen this play at Chichester Minerva Studio in 2021 and found it amusing and shocking in equal parts and like **Adam Wells** I have become a Martin McDonagh fan and this production did full justice to the quality of the writing. Despite the trials and tribulations that have dogged its journey to the Shinfield stage, the end result was well worth the time and effort and the cast and crew should be rightly proud of the production , although they may never want to eat Complan, porridge or Kimberleys again.

I hope they have all fully recovered from illness.

Thank you.

Nick

Nick Humby - NODA Representative - London Region - District 14