

The Beauty Queen of Leenane – Shockingly Too Hot to Handle

by Chris Felling

Posted on 20 November 2011

The Beauty Queen of Leenane feels a bit hard to summarize. A middle-aged and lonely Irish woman takes care of her filthy, insufferable mother. The dislike is very mutual and very vocal. They trade sarcastic remarks until an old beau comes to town, offering to steal our lonely heroine away. Then everything goes batsh*t insane. Things get pretty hardcore, which is something I don't say very often about plays about wisecracking Irish families. Let me try to explain.

Maureen Folan (Naomi Simpson) is essentially trapped in the family home with her mother Mag (Elizabeth Whitmarsh). Mag dumps pee in the sink – and worse – and reminds everyone of her urine infection on a regular basis. Mag also issues an endless stream of orders to adjust the radio and make porridge. Oh, and she also burns Maureen's mail and does her best to isolate her from the rest of the world. Whitmarsh sneers and nags like a nursing home nightmare, succeeding at making a thoroughly easy to hate antagonist but also succeeding at making her painfully funny to watch. If you've ever wanted to reach onstage and slap a character (the character, mind you, not the actress playing her) for being so... so... bad then you know you're watching a quality actor. Whitmarsh need pull no punches on Simpson, who clatters and door-slams about the well-designed kitchen set, dropping one liners and being lewd in the way only an undersexed forty-something can be. The Dooley brothers, Pato (Bill Adams) and Ray (Paul Wiebe) round out the cast. Adams' Pato is a familiar but likable down-on-his-luck Irish working man, sweet but a bit wistful, while his brother, a jobless wannabe toughguy, suffers Mag's torments believably enough. Accents are spot on from Simpson and Whitmarsh while noticeably weak from Wiebe.

Signs outside the theatre give us a heads-up about foul language and violence. At intermission you'll be wondering where the violence is. Let me try to explain by analogy without giving to much away. Imagine a hypothetical episode of Roseanne where she makes good on some threats and starts hacking big chunks out of Dan as he screams and cries for a mercy which will never visit him. The supposedly playful sarcasm of the show turns 180 degrees in a short, sharp twist, like snapping the neck of a rat with your bare hands, killing it the way Gulag inmates might so they could pierce its neck with their remaining teeth and warm themselves with its still-pumping blood.

Jazz hands. Theatre!

After Pato delivers a stoic but nevertheless quite heartfelt monologue, the second act of The Beauty Queen of Leenane does something like this. Genuinely disturbing violence is hard to pull off in theatre. Film has a broader arsenal of special effects and the option of cropping the fame into a discretion shot. If you're going to torture someone on stage then that's pretty much what

you have to do. If you're doing it mid-scene you can't even black the lights out all that much. When the script insists that scores be settled Judy Treloar and company go for broke. An act and a half build up towards the scene in question and taking a sledgehammer to the sarcastic comedy mood was exactly the right move – especially when a second twist is coming to make the show even darker. Honestly, I didn't think Langham Court had it in them to shock like this. I'm impressed.

That seems like a good enough note to close on. If you're squeamish, you'll like about half the play. If you aren't, you'll like much more and if you get a kick out of psych-thriller twists then Langham Court Theatre has a slap for your face that will fit just right. The Beauty Queen of Leenane's family drama flavor makes it fit right in with what you'd expect from LCT, but it's dark and shameless side are, for me at least, a refreshing departure. It brought a lot of the audience to their feet to applaud, at the very least. Good, bloody job, Langham Court!