

Don't let title fool you: Beauty Queen is anything but

by Amy Smart, Times Colonist, November 19, 2011

REVIEW

What: The Beauty Queen of Leenane

When: Until Dec. 3

Where: Langham Court Theatre

Rating: 4

Watching Langham Court Theatre's production of The Beauty Queen of Leenane is like peeking through your bickering neighbours' window. It's all in good fun at first, until you realize you've been giggling along to a tragically dysfunctional and abusive family.

The story, set in 1989 Galway, Ireland, centres on 40-year-old virgin Maureen Folan and her surly 70-year-old mother Mag. The two are trapped together in both a shared cottage and an interdependent but toxic relationship - the kind that brings out hilarious insults and spiteful go-out-of-your-way-to-sabotage-yourkin's-happiness antics.

Beauty Queen, penned by Martin McDonagh in only eight days at age 25, won him a Critics' Circle Theatre Award in 1996 for most promising playwright. The show's 1998 iteration earned four Tony Awards for acting and directing.

With solid material to work with, director Judy Treloar (Elizabeth Rex) drew the strong characters out of her actors, who are at once over-the-top and also relatably vulnerable. Even in the cruellest, meanest moments, the characters are human. The scowl-faced Mag, played by Elizabeth Whitmarsh, is the epitome of condescension - but the food stains smeared down the front of her dressing gown and the chamber pot of infected urine give away her ultimate helplessness.

Naomi Simpson does a particularly impressive job in the role of Maureen. She slips between the hardworking and honest-about-her-disdain daughter to a bumbling and bubbly flirt around the first man to give her attention in too long. The climax of the play relies on one of her emotional shifts, which had the audience wide-eyed and on the edge of their seats.

Like many of the themes in this story, the set is quintessentially and stereotypically Irish. It looks cosy and warm, with a wood stove and quilts, as well as a crucifix, blessing and photo of John F. Kennedy hanging on the wall. Good design by Bill Adams, who doubles as one of our four characters: Maureen's middling but warm-hearted love interest Pato Dooley.

The real beauty of Beauty Queen is the way the audience is carried unsuspectingly across that line between comedy and horror. Even in the moment where it's obvious that the cruelty between mother and daughter has gone too far, that one should escape and all might be well, the characters are so awful and manipulative that you're still sympathetic. Not an easy feat. Even as they sink into the deepest depths of insanity, we can relate to the rage only those closest to us can inspire by pushing just the right buttons.

asmart@timescolonist.com

© Copyright (c) The Victoria Times Colonist