

The Marble

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Liz's review

There are a number of things in Langham Court Theatre's production of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* that I cannot heap enough praise on. If I had to pick a highlight, it's hands down Naomi Simpson's performance as Maureen Folan. I don't want to give too much of the plot away so all I will say is the character goes through an abrupt shift, which Simpson somehow makes look effortless. Simpson has strong backing in the likes of Bill Adams as Pato Dooley, a man who offers Maureen a chance to escape the stumbling existence she has gotten herself into, and Elizabeth Whitmarsh as Mag Folan, Maureen's elderly, sabotaging mother. Whitmarsh in particular, comes close to stealing the show—alongside Simpson—and perhaps her only hindrance is that her character is less sympathetic. Still, it's a thrill to watch her play an old bitter hag who thinks nothing about stymieing her daughter's chance at happiness. Paul Wiebe as Ray Dooley has the unfortunate distinction of being the weakest performer amongst the cast. I believe this is in large part due to his Irish accent, which was neither particularly good nor consistent. Occasionally, however, he did hit his stride.

The story is this: Maureen lives with her elderly mother, who expects her daughter to cater to her every need. Maureen does so, but not without a great deal of delightful Irish caterwauling. After attending a local farewell "do," she hooks up with a long-time admirer, Pato, a man who in his own way is just as lonely as Maureen. The play has a distinct comedic vibe, which it all but abandons in the second act. Unfortunately, the transition from the sense of hope—that Maureen might get a chance at love in the first act, to the second, where we see just how damaged she really is—was not as smooth as I would like it. Don't get me wrong, the play itself is wonderful in its characters and its dialogue; and the story is solid, but if it had ended just three scenes earlier at a critical turning point, I would think it is a masterpiece. Instead, the play seems intent on hammering home the idea that it's a dark comedy that goes from dark to pitch black in the blink of an eye. The twist—which I don't want to give away—is both shocking and clever. Ending it there would have left things much more open ended, but I personally believe it would have been on a high note. In truth I'm not sure who to blame this hiccup on: the play itself or this particular production. I read somewhere that the kitchen of Maureen and Mags—the setting of the entire play—is supposed to feel cramped and claustrophobic. I found the set design to be quaint, rural and cozy. It's a beautiful set, but it doesn't contribute to our sense that Maureen feels trapped in her life. Still, I'm just being picky. This is one of the more enjoyable plays I've seen since the Fringe.

I'll end this review with more praise for the performances. When talking about the Victoria theatre scene, I often remark on the high calibre of talent this city has to offer, and how it goes largely unnoticed. Anyone reading this review should see *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, especially for Naomi Simpson's performance, to get what I'm talking about.