

The 40-year-old virgin Beauty Queen

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by Tia Low

The Beauty Queen of Leenane has it all. The production, which plays until Dec. 3 at Langham Court Theatre, is blackly captivating and tragic from the first scene to the last. The so-called “beauty queen” is Maureen Folan, a 40-year-old virgin with a history of mental illness. She is burdened by the task of caring for her bitter and elderly mother, Mag Folan, who at every opportunity aims to sabotage her daughter’s chance at happiness.

Playwright and filmmaker Martin McDonagh wrote the script in 1995 in eight days and was nominated for a Tony Award for best play. McDonagh has said he walks the line “between comedy and cruelty,” something he clearly did in Beauty Queen. The play boasts many cringe-worthy scenes, both funny and morose.

Directed by Judy Treloar, Beauty Queen is set in 1986 in the small, Irish town of Leenane. The set, designed by Bill Adams (who also fills the role of Maureen’s suitor, Pato Dooley), is a meticulous representation of an old stone Irish cottage. The greystone walls bring a damp, chilly feel to the kitchen and living room. The set looks real because much of it is. It has a running sink and stove that make steaming bowls of porridge and hot cups of tea, putting the audience right into the home of Mag and Maureen.

Elizabeth Whitmarsh perfects the disgruntled nature of Mag in her crooked walk and constant sullen expression. Her character is unkempt and seemingly never washes her badly stained housecoat. Naomi Simpson is excellent as she fully absorbs the role of Maureen, a worn woman in distress who has for years sacrificed her personal life for her mother’s needs.

The dialogue between Mag and Maureen makes their resentment of each other palpable. Near the start of the play, Maureen and Pato go home together after a party and flirt with the idea of courtship. But Mag succeeds in interfering with Maureen’s relationship with Pato. Each time this happened at the Nov. 18 performance, the audience gasped, clearly rooting for Maureen. However, as Maureen’s mental illness reveals itself, the tragedy of the story shifts to a whole different level.

Paul Wiebe, a newcomer to the stage, impresses with his theatrical debut as Ray Dooley, Pato’s energetic but frustrated younger brother who always gets stuck as the messenger between Maureen and Pato. Adams is also convincing as Pato, a kind but lonely man wanting to settle down. He’s perhaps Maureen’s last hope for a happy life.

Beauty Queen does not disappoint. It is full of surprises that will keep you second-guessing what you believe about the characters and the story as it develops. The dialogue can be hard to follow, as it is fast-paced and accent-heavy, but it lends to the play’s realism. As with any good production, it has a brilliant script, a dedicated cast of actors and outstanding production crew. Their efforts have translated the work into something that reveals truths of our own lives, leaving us wondering about these characters and how they got to be the way they are.