

Victoria Theatre Reviews

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EXCERPTS:

The Beauty Queen of Leenane is an early play from Irish writer (who actually grew up in London and still lives there, but was born of Irish parents from County Galway). This play certainly sets the tone and style for many of [Martin] McDonagh's future plays, which often feature sharply satiric portrayals of rural living in Ireland, and also often contain violence as a key element. The humor is very much there in McDonagh's razor-sharp writing, which I happen to love, and his characters are always strong, even in the midst of what can become horrific events. *Beauty Queen* centres around a highly toxic mother-daughter relationship that ends very, very badly as 40 year-old spinster virgin daughter Maureen tries one last ditch attempt to land a man and break away from her poisonous and ever-needy mother Mag. We find ourselves laughing as much in shock as in humor at the way these two women rip into each other, but by the end of this two-act play the laughs stop as Maureen takes action to prevent her mother from destroying her dreams.

[Director, Judy] Treloar shows her deft hand as director, as seen many times at Langham Court including last season's *Elizabeth Rex*. The back and forth between mother and daughter that forms the core of the play is handled exceptionally well, and Treloar has done what any director must do and has cast these two central roles with actresses who seem born to play these parts: Naomi Simpson shines in the role of Maureen and offers a portrayal that is equal parts tough as nails and fragile as cut glass, a terrific performance; Elizabeth Whitmarsh, a less experienced actress than Simpson, really surprises here and gives an effective portrait of a deeply-embittered woman. Both women are supported by Bill Adams as Pato Dooley, a potential love match for Maureen, and Paul Wiebe as Pato's younger brother and reluctant messenger boy. While I felt the men's work was slightly less well-realized than the women's, I did like Adams' quiet presence in his role...even though he is not quite the 40 year old burly building site laborer called for in the script, he plays the role with a nice energy and focus. Paul Wiebe is a young actor with lots of energy and is appealing onstage, but still needs to find the particular rhythm required to make an Irish dialect play flow, as he sometimes stepped over his acting partner's lines. Perhaps he will find this over the course of the run. The set is well-designed, as always, by Bill Adams, whose sets are always a treat to see. I had a few complaints about sound cues which occasionally are too loud and would prefer the radio sound to come through an onstage speaker rather than play in the house, which becomes distracting for an audience when the radio music runs right through a climactic scene.

I can thoroughly recommend Martin McDonagh's black comedy in this production with great performances by the lead actresses, but with the caveat that potential audience members should be prepared for some quite devastating violence late in the play.