



What We've Seen

The Beauty Queen of Leenane Keegan Theatre

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By Sam Thielman

A theater review is not a place for gossip and hearsay, but I do feel the need to address one rumor in particular: I'm sorry, the Walt Disney company will not be producing an animated musical version of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, or any of Martin McDonagh's other plays, for that matter. There will be no anthropomorphic cats to represent bitter Irish old maids, nor will there be any bouncy musical numbers about torturing one's mother with hot cooking grease. Sorry to disappoint.

Martin McDonagh's cheerfully horrifying play about Maureen, a woman on the old side of young (played by Nanna Ingvarsson), and her tyrannical mother Mag (Linda High), manages to sometimes disgust, sometimes amuse, and always enthrall, as the bitter, decades-old war between mother and daughter rages to its conclusion. Pato Dooley (Scott Graham) is a neighbor with a crush on Maureen; a tool she uses against her mother and to bring some life back into herself. With Pato, Maureen shines briefly through the tarnish of what must be thirty years of scowling and bitterness toward her mother, and it looks for a while like she's going to get away. Pato is gone much of the time, though, to England or America, and he communicates through his shiftless and violent brother Ray (Joe Baker), whom Mag manipulates with a skill inversely proportional to her physical strength. In one scene, he writes a note for her, distracted, while cursing her apparent obtusity. He stammers absently, "It's like talkin' to a... talkin' to a..."



Nanna Ingvarsson and Scott Graham

Richard Griewek

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“Brick wall,” she says.

“Aye, a brick wall.”

Linda High brilliantly reveals Mag as one by turns domineering and pitifully weak; here aged, lonely, and sympathetic; there twisting the knife in her daughter’s back. Nanna Ingvansson’s Maureen is easy to forgive when she has finally had enough, but both bear the scars of the other’s cruelty, emotional and otherwise. Ingvansson is so explosively chemical as Maureen that it’s an outright joy to see her find love, however briefly, in Pato. Her passionate spite finally changes into healthier emotion for the length of time that Pato is on the stage with her. McDonagh’s genius, here and elsewhere, calls these characters up as larger-than-life titans a la Greek tragedy, even in painfully mundane circumstances, while the actors in the Keegan’s production force us to love these people at their most heartless.

The show is expertly directed by Mark A. Rhea, recently of *The Lonesome West*, another of McDonagh’s ‘Leenane Trilogy.’ For all the brutality, these are friendly plays at heart, and it’s a trip down memory lane to hear Ray recounting the tale of how Coleman cut the ears of Valene’s dog in that other play. Heartwarming, so it is. George Lucas’ set is forgettable in the best sense; you notice it when you walk in, and then you’re there, and you don’t worry about it anymore (though there’s a particularly good and simple trick employed to make daylight shine through a window that seems to open on to the wings).

McDonagh’s fundamentally Irish voice rings forth at its uncensored best with *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. The emotional scope he presents within the confines of a single kitchen is breathtaking, and the production does it proud. Meanness and the pathos meet to the benefit of both, and produce something strange, and painful, and ultimately worth seeing.