

THEATRE: **Michael Billington** on a strangely un-Irish Juno And The Paycock at the Lyttelton and Tennessee Williams in Brighton

## Tragedy in a Dublin that never was

**P**ETER Gill's production of Juno and the Paycock at the Lyttelton is a cool, clear and by no means unenjoyable version of O'Casey's great tragic-comedy. What it lacks can be very simply stated: the sound of authentic Irish voices in some of the major roles and a set that evokes the decaying seediness of a Dublin tenement in 1922.

The latter is crucial. North Dublin in O'Casey's time had a higher death-rate from disease than Calcutta and 20,000 families lived in one-room apartments. This was the key to the Dublin Gate Theatre's recent magnificent revival which showed the Boyles living in a world of broken windows, peeling walls and torn horsehair chairs. It was not picturesque squalor but a reminder of how deprivation destroys personal values.

Deirdre Clancy's set at the Lyttelton lacks that sense of an occupied ruin. In the background is a misty vision of Georgian Dublin: in the foreground is a modestly pleasant two-room apartment with a communal tap on the landing and stairs leading up and down to neighbouring floors. But its pristine neatness undercuts the second-act transformation when the Boyles, believing they have come into money, import plush furniture. It also blurs the point that O'Casey's play is as much a Socialist attack on ruinous poverty as it is a humanist lament over internecine violence.

It is a great play precisely because it shows the characters being stripped of their illusions in just the same way as the Boyles' home is denuded of possessions. Jack Boyle, the strutting paycock, loses the inheritance that he hopes will keep him in parasitic clover: his wife, Juno, loses her son to the fevered cause of Irish Nationalism; and her impregnated

daughter, Mary, loses her devoted admirer once she is no longer a symbol of pure Catholic womanhood.

O'Casey explores his theme in dialogue that has the instinctive eloquence of the Dublin streets; but, amongst the key performers, only Tom Hickey's masterly Joxer Daly exudes an authentic Irishness. Taking his cue from the text, Mr Hickey gives us a furtive, shoulder-shrugging figure in hobo's hat, tailed coat and hobnail boots. But instead of coating Joxer in scuttling charm, Mr Hickey reminds us that he epitomises mendacity, disloyalty and greed.

This is a Dublin Autolycus stuffing bread into his pocket and wrapping money in a filthy kerchief; and there is a malevolent glee about the way he urges Mrs Madigan to re-possess the Boyles' gramophone. When Mr Hickey goes off-stage you feel he exits not into the wings but into real life.

About the other major performances my feelings are neutral. Tony Haygarth's Jack Boyle, with Popeye sailor-pipe stuck jauntily in his mouth, captures the character's swaggering fecklessness. But Mr Haygarth is too much the lovable drunk and too little the cruel father and husband.

when, for instance, he tears up his daughter's book it seems a momentary flash of anger rather a mark of his petty, ignorant destructiveness.

Linda Bassett as Juno has the right suggestion of over-burdened domesticity: when she fries up a breakfast or puts the kettle on the hob she makes you feel that she has been doing this all her life. But when it comes to the great final plea to "Take away this murdering hate an' give us Time own eternal love", I miss the piercing sense that she is speaking for a generation of Irish mothers.

The Boyle family, with the exception of Linus Roache's haggard Johnny, seem oddly English: it is the minor roles, including Pauline Dolaney's grieving Mrs Tancred and Fabian Cartwright's desperate suitor, that breathe the spirit of Dublin. The result is a production with many good touches (I shall not forget the way the characters sit transfixed in front of the horn gramophone as if mesmerised by its novelty) but one that lacks a sense of rooted authenticity. O'Casey, I suspect, demands meticulous realism and totally Irish casting to convey the sensation of tragedy being spun out of the mundane texture of everyday life.



Tom Hickey as Joxer Daly

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