

THEATRE: Irish melodrama is happily revived at the National and fine acting makes for an outstanding touring Government Inspector

A fine bag

Michael Billington
at the Olivier

WHEN the Abbey Theatre brought Dion Boucicault's *The Shaughraun* to the Aldwych in 1988, many Dubliners voiced the fear that it would project the wrong image of their country. And my good friend, Frank Deane, raised a similar point this week about the validity of a revival in the wake of Enniskillen and Gibraltar. It is a serious question; but the best answer is provided both by Boucicault's play and by the affectionate exuberance of Howard Davies's superb production.

The Shaughraun is comic melodrama rather than social realism. But it invites us to laugh with the Irish rather than at them and strikes me as a plea for political tolerance. Its abundant plot has to do with efforts to thwart a villainous squire who has had a Sligo gent deported to Australia on trumped-up charges of Fenianism. He is outwitted by a combination of the returning convict, the eponymous ragamuffin poacher and a compassionate English redcoat.

It is, in fact, the very reverse of a 19th-century Irish joke. It celebrates willness and bravery rather than stupidity. It constantly punctures the racial

stereotyping of the English captain who keeps beginning sentences with "You Irish." And, if you listen to the text, you realise that Boucicault is the avowed enemy of those who want to translate Ireland into a picturesque escape-route. One of the key charges against the villainous Kinchela is that he has turned the Ffolliott family estate into a tourist trap and is even charging sixpence a head for admission. Odd moments make one uneasy: the illiteracy of Conn, *The Shaughraun*, is treated as a humorous plot-point. But Andrew Parkin gets it dead right in his published Introduction when he says that Conn is tough, good-hearted and crafty and "totally different from the blustering buffoon of a stage Irishman."

Boucicault also opened the door to Synge, O'Casey and Behan by bringing on stage the spendthrift richness of Irish speech. The best moment comes when Conn, faced with his promise to leave off drinking, replies "I did, barrin' one thimbleful a day, just to take the crusty out of the water."

Boucicault may romanticise rural Ireland. But he also celebrates it and enters a plea for clemency towards political prisoners. And Howard Davies's production not only hits the right note of unpatronising delight but also, in William Dudley's design, creates some of the most remarkable effects yet seen on the Olivier stage. Using

the drum-revolve, Mr Dudley has created a wonderful Gothic folly of a set combining brick turrets, ivy-covered abbey, tumbling rocks, thatched cottages and narrow ginnels leading the eye straight to the shimmering sea.

My only quail would be that scenes such as that in which Conn's apparent corpse springs to life and runs rings round a pair of thuggish criminals are so fluently choreographed as to lose some of their rough fun. But Stephen Rea's Conn is a miraculously tactful performance that plays down colourful Irishness and instead brings out sheer good-heartedness: when, for instance, Mr Rea whips trout and grouse out of his hunting-pink jacket like a deft conjuror you are reminded that it is his charitable poaching that is keeping the women alive. Like a Synge hero, Mr Rea also combines mercurial bravado with pure filial terror.

Shaun Scott as the English captain exudes exactly the right bloodless courtesy, Felicity Montagu makes his Irish love a twinkling equivocator and Stephen Moore as the squire and Anthony O'Donnell as his stubby accomplice give the villains a comic edge. With the aid of Dominic Muldowney's sweetly melancholic music, the evening offers a pleasurable vindication of melodrama rather than a tasteless exploitation of Irish folkiness.



Romantic idyll? Julia Dearden and Stephen Rea in *The Shaughraun* PHOTOGRAPH: DOUGLAS JEFFERY

Billington on *The Shaughraun*

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Mon, Dec 28, 2020