

Martin McDonagh's much-hyped second play does not disappoint. The boy is very good, but has he anything to say, asks **Michael Billington**

Playboy with a limp

IS THERE such a thing as the real Ireland? Or is it a myth created down the ages by writers, artists, and filmmakers? That is the intriguing question posed by Martin McDonagh in *The Cripple Of Inishmaan* at the National Theatre which, like the same writer's *The Beauty Queen Of Leenane*, both lovingly feeds off Irish fantasy and offers its own wittily ironic, post-modern critique.

McDonagh's comic fable comes in heavily inverted compass. The setting is the bleak Aran island of Inishmaan in 1904. The play's hero, Billy, is a crippled orphan whose parents drowned in a mysterious boating accident when he was a baby. Reared by two slightly hatty pretend-aunts, the bookish, romanticising Billy seeks to escape this stifling, prying community by joining the film unit that is making *Man Of Aran* on the neighbouring island of Inishmore. What we see is the despised Billy seeking to achieve a new identity — and incidentally gain the love of the sharp-tongued local beauty — by entering the make-believe world of film and ultimately fleeing to Hollywood.

McDonagh's play is full of occasional references which all reinforce the central theme of reality versus fantasy. A pivotal figure is a local tale-spinner, Johnny Pateenmike, who earns his keep by turning gossip into an art-form and who might have stepped straight out of a Bourgeois play. Sygne's *The Playboy Of The Western World*, in which the boy-hero achieves maturity by turning his patriarchal fantasies into reality, is also McDonagh's palpable prototype: what he seems to be saying is that Sygne, once accused by St John Brive of being "a faker of peasant speech", himself created a mythical version of Irish west coast life.

But McDonagh's main point is that cinema has done more than anything to foster the Irish myth. It is no accident that the play is set at the time of *Man Of Aran* which was once seen as a realistic portrait of an Irish fishing community. The richest, funniest scene is that in which Flaherty's film is shown on Inishmaan: the islanders either ignore it totally in pursuit of their local feuds or hilariously question its authenticity crying: "It's rare

that off Ireland you get sharks." Even the great quasi-documentary turns out to be a lie.

McDonagh's skill lies in having it both ways: in simultaneously exploiting and undermining Irish romantic myth. But he creates one character who, as far as I can see, is a genuine comic original: the local beauty, Helen, who is driven by a manic fury and who works, somewhat destructively, for the village egg-man. Offering to play the game of *Grandma's Island* with her brother, she enthusiastically cracks a succession of raw eggs against his pate: a practical demonstration of the yolk of colonial oppression. As marvellously played by Aidan O'Sullivan, a seep-beanpole in tattered stockings, the character emerges as an authentic Irish termagant.

The play's main weakness is a technical one: McDonagh falls into a mechanical habit of comic reversal so that any seeming statement of truth is instantly upended. By the end, you can see the device coming a mile off. Even after two plays, one also longs for McDonagh to write from his own, rather than refracted, experience.

But, although *The Cripple* at times has the air of ingenious pastiche, it is still buoyantly funny.

It is also well directed by Nicholas Hytner and beautifully designed by Bob Crowley. We are constantly reminded of the looming presence of the Aran Isles, "rumped in the sun's teeth" in a phrase from an early Flaherty poem, and even the country store, with its shelves of tinned peas, has the right evoked quality. Ruardur Conroy, who has the spindly intensity of a young O'Toole, makes an impressive stage debut as Billy and there is wonderfully assured support from Anita Reeves and Dearbhla Ní Mhaoldomhnaigh as the adopted Billy and from Ray McBride as the local folklorist.

It is a highly accomplished play that suggests the literary and cinematic myths of Ireland are so engrained they have now turned into reality. But, while recognising McDonagh's skill, one just hopes he will eventually move from ironic commentary on Ireland to rigorous self-revelation.

1 In rep on the Coliseum 0771-928 2253.

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