

Too heartless to be called great

FEW second plays have been so eagerly, and perhaps apprehensively, awaited as Martin McDonagh's *The Cripple of Inishmaan* at the Cottesloe.

McDonagh knocked everyone for six last year when the Royal Court premiered *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. It was an astonishingly assured debut, densely plotted, richly characterised and blessed with a mix of wild humour, deep feeling and macabre cruelty.

Even more surprising was the fact that, although the piece was persuasively set in deepest Connemara and owed a debt to J M Synge, its 25-year-old author turned out to be a lippy south Londoner who only visited Ireland for his holidays.

The first thing to be said about *The Cripple of Inishmaan* is that it proves McDonagh is no one-hit wonder. He writes almost as well as he says he does.

This time the action is set on the Aran Island of Inishmaan (another cheeky nod to Synge, who discovered his dramatic voice and subject matter on the Aran Islands). The year is 1934, and excitement in the local community is high because the Hollywood film director Robert Flaherty has arrived on a neighbouring island to make a movie, *Man of Aran* (this is a matter of fact, not fiction).

No one wants to become involved in the picture more than Cripple Billy, a cruelly

Theatre

The Cripple of Inishmaan National Theatre

disabled teenage orphan brought up by two adoptive "aunties" who run the local shop.

McDonagh brings all nine of his characters to vivid, eccentric life, and reveals a terrific ear for quirky dialogue. The *craic* has rarely been so much fun. It will be some time before I forget Helen, a wild, sexy spitfire, hilariously played by Aisling O'Sullivan, who is forever pelting people with eggs (in particular the local priests, who seem unable to keep their hands off her bum); almost equally memorable is Johnny Pateenmike (Ray McBride), for whom gossip is an addiction and who has been trying for decades to get his mother, now 90, to drink herself to death. She just keeps blissfully slurping the stuff back.

Yet, though I laughed loudly and often, it was impossible to silence nagging doubts. There is a faint hint of the fake about the piece, a suggestion that it isn't so much Irish as picturesquely "Oirish". Though McDonagh has famously declared that he has little knowledge of the theatre, *The Cripple of Inishmaan* often seems like a skilful parody of almost every Irish play you have ever seen.

More worrying is the tone.



Spitfire: Aisling O'Sullivan, with Ruaidhri Conroy

Sentimentality and cruelty march hand in hand. There's a revealing moment when Billy tells the feckless young lad Bartley, "You shouldn't laugh at other people's misfortunes." Bartley, genuinely baffled, simply asks, "Why?"

It may be unfair, but I detect a similar heartlessness about McDonagh himself. Billy (a raw, touching performance from Ruaidhri Conroy) is used and abused by the dramatist almost as much as by the other characters. The reversals in his fortunes, the dramatic games about whether he has TB or not, are played out with the calculating detachment of a chess player. The ending is merciless, and throughout

the writing is devoid of the generosity of spirit which enriches the less showy, but more satisfying, plays of Billy Roche.

There's no doubt that Nicholas Hytner's beautifully acted production, evocatively designed by Bob Crowley, is both funny and gripping, with especially fine contributions from Anita Reeves and Dearbhla Molloy as the batty aunties.

I still don't feel I've cracked the McDonagh enigma. Is he a potentially great dramatist, or merely a very clever one? On this evidence, I'm beginning to incline to the latter verdict.

Tickets: 0171 928 2252

CHARLES SPENCER

Inishmaan Charles Spencer Telegraph



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ianlharris

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