



Compelling: Resident Conroy as Billy with Aisling O'Sullivan

Comedy with a cruel edge

MARTIN McDONAGH proves himself a master of the art of inciting cruel laughter with *The Cripple of Inishmaan*. He knows just how to amuse an audience by getting some deprived creature up for humiliation and mockery. His new comedy, following fast and funny upon the *Beauty Queen of Lenoire*, which won him 1994's Evening Standard Most Promising Playwright award, lacks the compassion or the conviction of the first. It may be set in 1934 on an island off the Irish coast, but its unlovely heart is lodged in 1994 London.

Of course there are mitigating theatrical circumstances. McDonagh knows how to spin an actual yarn; his bouncy, bawdy Irish humour comes a firm, cynical hold. Nicholas Rynner's superbly acted production and Bob Crowley's settings convey a sense of a cut-off rural community where peeping, prying and prattence are favourite pursuits. And a brawl between a goose and a cat runs as soon as you do Billy, an 19-year-old with crippled arms and leg, but well-developed mind, dreams of escaping to act in Hollywood, when Robert Fildes films on the island.

The play follows the thematic line of *The Beauty Queen* — with Billy's hopes of escaping raised and then dashed. Again McDonagh depends upon more than a dash of old-fashioned melodrama to enliven this bitter Irish cocktail — with a focused letter, both of crucial eavesdropping and revelations about his parents' death, Billy's trip to Hollywood, helped along by his claim to have TB, is not what it seems — as the ironic, manipulative denouement shows.

In ruin to the old fashioner's cruel comedy which rings true. The scene is a small country shop — which Crowley places in the oppressive shadow of dark cliffs and grey sea. Here Billy's two old adopted aunts who have brought him up, flutter anxiously around like agitated butterflies.



FIRST NIGHT
by
Nicholas de Jongh
The Cripple of Inishmaan
Evening Standard ★

Anita Reeves's simple-minded Kate, all grim, quavering gentility and revealing in anxiety, is comically abused off against the by decried of Dearbhla Molloy's Elson.

When the old women rowfully dismiss Billy as too unattractive and disabled to inspire erotic interest in girls except "the blind" or the backward or one so desperate "she'd kiss a dog", I felt the forebodings of disbelief. Conventional devout old women would not so describe the boy they adore. McDonagh's cruel humour is unattractively imposed upon the women. Resident Conroy's compelling Billy, with his attractive androgynous face and sharp turn of mind, simply does not justify the inventive abuse meted out to him. His air of plucky doggedness is instantly appealing.

So when Billy serves as target for the scorn of the girl he fancies — Aisling O'Sullivan's rascally mischievous tom-boy, Helen, her liberated manner and taunting mockery sounds a thoroughly 1930s note of alternative comedy. The abuse does not belong to the characters who dispatch it. Endearing, Irish eccentric.

— Ray McBride's chronic eavesdropper and Doreen Hepburn as his indignant old mamma — illuminate the comedy. But there's a generous and unmanicured truth in McDonagh's portrait of the cripple as a subject for amusement, both theatrical flare and promise is being misdirected.

Rating: No stars — adequate
★ good, ★★ very good
★★★ outstanding, ★ poor
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Sun, Feb 6, 2022