

# Lives lost in old haunts

ALASTAIR MUIR

## Theatre

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The Weir  
The Provok'd Wife

IRELAND keeps sending us gifted playwrights, and none more promising, in recent years, than Conor McPherson. Or perhaps the time has come to drop the "promising" and speak only of achievement.

Two of McPherson's plays, *This Lime Tree Bower* and *St Nicholas*, have already been seen in London, at the Bush Theatre; each of them left audiences in no doubt as to his liveliness. But *The Weir*, at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs (the former Ambassadors), is a work of a different order — more searching, wider-ranging, remarkably poised and mature for a writer who is still only 26.

Brendan runs a sparsely furnished little country pub (not much more than a display of KP Nuts on the walls). Two of his none-too-numerous regulars drift in: white-haired Jack, a small-time garage proprietor, and Jim, the handyman who helps him out. Finbar, who follows them, is a prosperous hotelier, and a relative stranger these days. But he has just negotiated the sale of a house to Valerie, an attractive young woman from Dublin. He wants to show her the local sights — and (married man though he is) to show her off.

Valerie's presence energises the men. Without doing anything as crude as competing for her attention, they try to make an impression on her, and they start telling her stories — tales of the supernatural; stories about fairies, about apparitions, about a ghost who issued a peculiarly macabre command to the man digging his grave.

She listens politely, but when she leaves the room (for the obvious reason) they start worrying that they have upset her. Angry feelings flare up; they only just avoid an open quarrel. Then, on her return, Valerie tells them a ghost story of her own. It is far more painful than anything we have heard so far; it also reveals how distressing she must have found the last of the stories the men told, the one about the ghost and the grave.

None of the stories is a mere yarn. Each of them draws on the fears or sorrows of the



Could be funnier Alison Steadman in 'The Provok'd Wife'

individual story-teller. There is a fine phrase in a poem by William Empson: "all losses haunt us". *The Weir* is about people who are almost literally haunted by what they have lost, or never found.

Valerie's story stands apart, however. Not only because it is so harrowing, but because in her case the real-life context comes first and the haunting second. We are directly exposed to her pain; we are also set on course for the pure naturalism (no trace of the uncanny about it) of the final story — Jack's self-reproachful tale of lost love and an unfulfilled life.

The stories are beautifully constructed. Every word in them is made to count, including the apparent pieces of verbal fluff — McPherson knows how eloquent a "yep" or a "this is it" can be when it is properly positioned. Still, the fact that story-telling bulks so large in the play might seem to confirm the notion that his natural form is the monologue. (*This Lime Tree Bower*

consists of a set of monologues, *St Nicholas* is a tale told by a single narrator — a monodrama.)

Personally I don't find reliance on monologues as much of a limitation as some commentators suggest. But in any case the criticism, in so far as it is one, no longer applies.

*The Weir* is anything but a set of stories strung together. It brings to life the full dramatic possibilities of its subject-matter — through pungent dialogue, through the manner in which the stories are juxtaposed, and above all through the interplay of personality.

In myriad small ways we are constantly led to reassess our sense of the characters, and of the effect they have on one another. How finely calculated the portrait of Finbar is, for instance — the man who can't quite get things right, but who doesn't get them completely wrong, either. How adroit the intimations that Jack, for all his superior qualities, can't help feeling jeal-

ous of him. And how engaging the humour that threads its way through the entire play, or all but its most sombre passages.

The staging is magnificent. Ian Rickson, like all the best directors, directs with the art that conceals art. I've no idea exactly what he has done, but the result speaks for itself. And as for the acting, a piece as concentrated and tightly knit as this couldn't afford a single only-quitte-good performance, and it doesn't get one. Jim Norton is utterly compelling as Jack — talkative and volatile, yet sometimes coming out with a note as deep as Paul Robeson. Gerard Horan (Finbar), Brendan Coyle (Brendan) and Kieran Abern (Jim) are all flawlessly authentic. Julia Ford (Valerie) has in some ways the most difficult task — we could easily find ourselves resisting such a direct assault on our feelings; but she brings to it everything that is called for, in skill and emotional transparency alike.

AT THE Old Vic, Peter Hall's repertory company are presenting an interesting and broadly successful production of Sir John Vanbrugh's Restoration comedy *The Provok'd Wife*, directed by Lindsay Posner. It is Restoration in kind, though hardly in date: it was first produced as late as 1897, and the version being used is the 1726 revision, in which the drunken Sir John Brute masquerades as his own wife. (In the original it was as a clergyman.)

It is odd to think that in the 18th century David Garrick invested Brute with a certain charm. To modern tastes he is the husband from hell, which is how Michael Pennington plays him — scruffy-haired, leering, diseased-looking (though it is a subtle performance that also allows for a certain amount of pathos and a good deal of self-pity).

No one else in the cast quite measures up to Pennington; no one else brings out the comedy quite as deftly as he does at his best — in the passage, for example, where he describes how a lady of leisure fritters away her day. The production as a whole could be — should be — much funnier. But there are brisk contributions from, among others, Clare Swinburne and Stephen Noonan; the dramatic vigour of the piece comes across, and so does Vanbrugh's gift for easy natural dialogue.

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