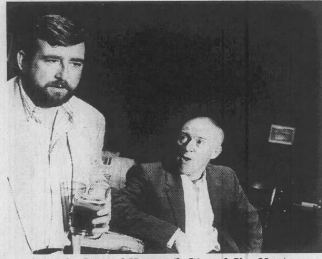


REVIEWS

Tall tales and consolation for a stranger in rural Ireland

Theatre

The Weir
Royal Court at
the Ambassadors



Superb: Gerard Horan (left) and Jim Norton

AMONG NEW Irish playwrights, it has been Martin McDonagh who has received the lion's share of acclaim and column inches. But, though there is no doubt that he is hugely talented, there is a heartlessness about his writing that I find increasingly off-putting. You'll be able to decide for yourself when his *Leenane Trio* transfers from Galway to the Royal Court later this month. In the meantime the Court is offering this marvellous new play by another young Irish writer, Conor McPherson, who seems to me to be just as gifted as — and far more sympathetic than — McDonagh. Still only in his mid-twenties, McPherson has until now confined himself to monologues. In *This Lime*

Tree Bower three characters described, often to hilarious effect, the events leading up to a bungled robbery in a small Irish town. In *St Nicholas* Brian Cox gave a *tour de force* as a boozey, self-loathing theatre critic who became bizarrely entangled with vampires. This new piece represents something of a breakthrough, because for the first time the characters actually talk to each other. But McPherson continues his habit of turning drama into spellbinding story-telling. The action is set in a quiet bar deep in rural Ireland, beautifully caught in Rae Smith's lovingly detailed design. You can even smell the peat smoke. McPherson brilliantly captures

inconsequential pub chat between the landlord and two locals, all of them unmarried, but then a pushy local businessman arrives with a young woman who has just moved to the area. What follows is a series of tales of the supernatural, as these delightfully drawn characters attempt to impress the stranger from Dublin. But then Valerie tells her own story. I don't want to give too much away, because stories lose their point if you know how they end. Suffice it to

say that Valerie's tale is an account of terrible personal loss, and it turns this amiable comedy into something much deeper and more painful. What makes *The Weir* so moving is the grace with which the characters treat Valerie and attempt to console her. Unlike McDonagh, McPherson seems to find the best in people and his writing has a compassion that never curdles into sentimentality. The play brings a whole community to life, showing lives that are far from fulfilled, indeed desperately lonely, but which are nevertheless endured with courage and humour. And without ever lapsing into the self-consciously poetic, the writing is rich, vivid

and often wonderfully funny. Ian Rickson does this lovely play proud with a production that beautifully captures the mixture of comedy and pain, and the rhythms of the stories. You find yourself hanging on to every word. All five members of the cast are superb, with especially fine work from Julia Ford as the brave, grieving Valerie, Jim Norton as old Jack, who touchingly describes how he missed his one chance of love, and Kieran Aherne as the gentle, melancholy Jim. McPherson is a distinctive talent to cherish and I await his next play with considerable impatience. Tickets: 0171 565 5000

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Clipped By:
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Mon, Oct 16, 2023