

THE Royal Court's infatuation with Ireland and Irish playwrights teeters on the verge of the obsessive and the insular — has anyone presumed to tell the Court's Stephen Daldry about a place called Europe?

But there's no denying the strange theatrical potency or the significance of Conor McPherson's *The Weir*. His play deals with ghosts, and, in an intellectual rather than physical sense, is utterly haunting.

At first it looks as if McPherson is just set upon an eloquent commemoration of Irish rural apartness, of the old Irish cult of superstition and a belief in things that go more than bump in the night. But then, in a real *coup de théâtre*, gossiping reminiscence gives way to revelation.

McPherson suggests an Irish belief in spirits may not just be a matter of gullibility and fairytale romanticism, but a sign that in heightened, extreme circum-

Ratings: No stars — adequate
★ good, ★★ very good,
★★★ outstanding, X poor

Spirits on top of an Irish whiskey

The Weir ★
Royal Court
Upstairs/Ambassadors

NICHOLAS DE JONGH

stances, we apparently experience things that defy cool reason. Ian Rickson's terrific production sets the scene in a dusky rural bar in Sligo, where youngish Brendan plays host to lonesome loners: Jim, bachelor-boy in his 40s, still with his old mammy, garage-owner Jack whose hopes of marriage lie deep in the past, and married Finbar, hopefully escorting Valerie, a thirtysomething woman who has

bought a house in the locality. Rae Smith's ideal set evokes the bleak bar-room atmosphere, and as they drink, each man sets nerves jangling with memories of ghostly things which have defied rational explanation.

Their reminiscing prompts Valerie, in a breathtaking account of loss and contact with her dead infant daughter, to suggest how frail our grasp upon reality, how controlled some people are by a sense of possession. Julia Ford as Valerie gives a mesmerising performance, whose understated naturalness makes her pain and bewilderment the more real.

Rickson's production, remarkable for its top-flight, jocular per-



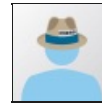
Bar-room philosophers: Kieran Ahern, Brendan Coyle and Julia Ford

formances, is a superlatively arranged piece of theatrical architecture and atmosphere: it keeps Valerie out of close focus and then draws her in. Her revelations inspire a consoling sympathy and put into relief the parched lives of

Kieran Ahern's mother-possessed Jim, Brendan Coyle's barman and, especially, Jim Norton's desolate old garage owner whose life has come to nothing much. A high delight.

● Box office: 0171 565 5000.

Weir de Jongh Standard



Clipped By:

ianlharris

Mon, Oct 16, 2023