

# Oh what a lovely tale of Ireland's wartime manners

YOU DO not expect to find serious political tensions flaring close to the kitchen-sink, even when the scene is southern Ireland and soldiers from three armies find themselves at one domestic kitchen table.

But then Frank McGuinness's delightful, romantic comedy of Second World War manners leaves drama's well-worn tracks and heads for trickier political terrain.

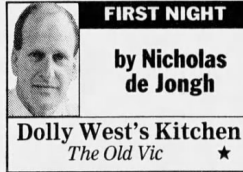
Dolly West's Kitchen raises awkward questions about a subject usually left under wraps.

What did the southern Irish feel about the policy of neutrality to Hitler between 1939-1945? What were their feelings about American and British soldiery in northern Ireland who came over the border in search of food and fun? Did the Irish really hope Hitler rather than the allies would seize crucial Atlantic ports?

Grave matters of war, neutrality and invasion loom ominously over McGuinness's broad-brush, occasionally soap-operatic comedy and give it edgy sharpness.

Joe Vanek's set — a vast, ugly kitchen, fringed by venetian blinds and surrounded by open space to suggest a garden — helps little. But Rima West, the play's camp, heavy-drinking materfamilias, always glad to give convention V-signs of defiance makes an exuberant catalyst.

Pauline Flanagan, wearing a constant smile of amusement, slips



FIRST NIGHT

by Nicholas de Jongh

Dolly West's Kitchen  
The Old Vic ★

deftly into this role and makes it a perfect, comic fit.

When the old woman returns home from the pub one evening with a couple of handsome young American GIs in tow, the scene is set for ructions.

For Rima's only son, Justin is a hatchet-faced officer in the Irish army who cannot bear the sight of British army uniform. He has already failed to banish Steven Pacey's Alec, an English soldier, sweet on Justin's own sister Dolly.

Sexual passions and political prejudices, ranged in antagonistic force, are now set for the smack of firm conflict.

But, thanks to the believable surprise which McGuinness springs, the war of words between Justin and the Americans never quite materialises.

For one, GI Perry Layton Ojeda's Marco, proves to be a sharp, wise-cracking queen, whose jabbing, put-downs come with as sexy or witty forcefulness as any dreamed up by Mae West. What's more



Dolly mixtures: Donna Dent, left, Perry Layton Ojeda and Harry Carnahan at the Old Vic Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR

Marco is well out of the closet at a time before closets concealed gay life-styles.

"Do you know what Hitler does to men like you?" Justin asks Marco. "Why do you think I'm fighting?" comes the illuminating retort.

It does not take much withering, queenly banter before Marco blows Justin's false, heterosexual cover and gladly finds the Irishman smitten with him. Justin's unhappily married sister, Esther, similarly falls for Jamie, the other GI.

The comic problems inspired by

these couplings, with Dolly joining the erotic fray, may seem far-fetched.

But those with old memories of wartime Ireland, its atmosphere of sexual saturnalia and the impact of the Americans will recognise the play's veracity.

As war ends, the play loses its joyful comic focus and its interesting portrayal of how tribal loyalties and erotic longings pull Rima's adult children in opposite direction. Dolly West's Kitchen then becomes The Three Siblings, a vari-

ant on Chekhov's Three Sisters, as it narrows down to deal with the melodrama of three potentially liberating love affairs.

But in Patrick Mason's sparky production, invigorated by Catherine Byrne's unhappy Esther and Donna Dent's Dolly, Second World War Ireland still comes into fresh, fascinating view.

Ratings: - ○ adequate, ★ good, ★★ very good, ★★★ outstanding, X poor

More reviews: Page 57

Dolly de Jongh Standard

Clipped By:

ianlharris

13 Dec 2025