

REVIEW: McDonagh Remains the Master of Mean

By Brent Hallenbeck • *Burlington Free Press* Staff Writer • April 2, 2009

Martin McDonagh is perhaps best known as the Oscar-nominated screenwriter for the 2008 Colin Farrell film "In Bruges" -- he might be the only writer today capable of turning a darkly comic movie script about British hit men on a forced holiday in Belgium into a metaphor for sacrifice, faith and Christianity -- but the Brit has been making an impression with his stage works for more than a decade now.

His first play, "The Beauty Queen of Leenane," won McDonagh a Tony Award nomination right off the bat and established him as one of the top young play (and now film) writers around. Champlain Theatre, which in 2005 staged a fine production of McDonagh's "The Cripple of Inishmaan," opened a similarly strong presentation Wednesday at FlynnSpace of "The Beauty Queen of Leenane."

"The Beauty Queen of Leenane," set in Ireland as are most of McDonagh's works, tells the decidedly un-heartwarming tale of a mother and daughter, Mag and Maureen (played respectively by Ruth Wallman and Kelly Thomas). The play opens with the two women engaging in amusingly uneasy verbal interplay, mostly centering on how the mother doesn't appreciate all the chores her live-in daughter does for her. The feeling is mutual, as Maureen tears her mother down with lines that are alternately caustic ("You're old and your stupid and you don't know what you're talking about") and borderline hilarious ("The world doesn't revolve around your taste in biscuits").

Maureen's animosity is clearly derived not just from her abusive mother but also from her loneliness, which is broken by an evening with an amiable local construction worker named Pato (John D. Alexander). Her fragile mental health seems ready to tip in whichever direction her relationship with Pato heads, up or down.

As "The Beauty Queen of Leenane" develops, it becomes obvious that the qualities of her mother that Maureen so despises are manifesting in her. The comedy-drama of the first half of the play tips heavily toward drama in the second act as we discover that these particular family bonds are fused together by fierce heat. Then the questions start coming: Is cruelty contagious? Inherited? Inevitable?

The three main actors all performed in the earlier production of "The Cripple of Inishmaan" and know their way around an Irish brogue, not to mention McDonagh's rich scripts. Not every performance as a cranky, mean mother can be described as delightful, but Wallman's is just that. She elicits laughs with a simple "oh" or the crinkle of a brow, and finds something deep down in Mag that allows the audience to bear a shred of sympathy that's necessary to make the events of the second act effective.

Thomas, an instructor at Champlain College, plays Maureen as a heartless, if understandably wounded, woman who's approaching middle age with a miserable present and no glimmer of a future. Her character

acquires more depth, and a strange dose of sympathy, as her relationship with her mother becomes even more complex as the play develops.

Alexander brings his usual intensity to his role as Pato, all the more amazing considering he's fresh off an even more energetic performance in David Mamet's "American Buffalo" by the Green Candle Theatre Company; he's a one-man repertory company. The only other on-stage role belongs to Champlain College freshman William Cook, who's charming as Pato's squirrely brother, Ray. He adeptly joins in on the incredulity at Mag's difficult ways, and shows a great deal of promise for upcoming seasons of Champlain Theatre.

Director Joanne Farrell brings McDonagh's crisp script in nicely at well under two hours and keeps the humor and tragedy at just the right levels. The play takes place in the cramped kitchen Mag and Maureen share, and the set designed by Burlington playwright Jim Lantz ("The Bus," "American Machine") is a work of shabby beauty.

Like all of McDonagh's works, "The Beauty Queen of Leenane" has an unsettling mean streak. Good theater, though, is rarely comforting.