

SEVEN DAYS (03.23.05)

Hurray for Hollywood

BY JONATHAN WHITTON

Theater review: *The Cripple of Inishmaan*

Great Irish whiskey goes down with a sting, then spreads its comforting warmth. That same bittersweet balance marks the Champlain Players' able, acerbic production of *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, now playing at Champlain College's Alumni Auditorium.

Martin McDonagh, a contemporary, award-winning Irish playwright, is a born storyteller. He constructs about-turns, plants one-liners, and develops characters with a palpable anger that never overwhelms his onstage action. The resulting productions are textured, dangerous and darkly funny.

He's perhaps best known for his Tony Award-winning *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, a biting mother-daughter melodrama that formed part of his Leenane trilogy. *The Cripple of Inishmaan* is the first in his Aran Island trilogy. A blasphemously funny tragicomedy in the tradition of *Beauty Queen*, it has "a biteen" more heart.

The setting of *Cripple* is the Island of Inishmaan, a rocky, three-mile stretch of land off the coast of western Ireland. The time is circa 1934. The event that shakes up the otherwise uneventful island existence is the historically accurate arrival of Hollywood film-director Stephen Flaherty, who selects a remote coastal region nearby for the production of his film, *The Man of Aran*.

We never catch sight of the director or film set. But the movie gives the island's official gossipmonger, Johnnypateenmike (John David Alexander), his first real scoop after years of having to make do with trivial squabbles and misbehavior; here cow-tipping is big news. Intent on being part of the action, the island's young people -- Slippy Helen (Alexandra Sevakian) and her brother Bartley (Colin Cramer) -- begin bribing the mysterious Babby Bobby (Seth Jarvis) to ferry them by boat to the filming location.

And our teenage hero Cripple Billy (Jason Briody) is determined not to be left behind. For him, a job in the film represents a rare chance to escape the place where even his well-intentioned foster "Aunties," Kate and Eileen Osbourne (Kelly J. Thomas & Elisabeth Lehr), see nothing wrong in appending the word "cripple" to his name.

To reveal much more would spoil the fun of the evening. Suffice it to say that Cripple Billy *does* indeed make it off the island, and the ripple effect is "fucking" wonderful. McDonagh's quintessential twists in the second act keep the play enticing and suspenseful.

As we follow Billy's odyssey and its effect on the other islanders, the use of *Man of Aran* emerges as far more than a nifty little plot device. It cleverly juxtaposes reality and make-believe. Flaherty's film controversially portrayed Irish coastal life as idyllic. McDonagh's play explodes the romantic myths propagated by Flaherty's actual film.

But a well-made play is only as good as the actors in it, and this production boasts a superlative ensemble.

Jason Briody has the arduous task of transforming into pretzel-bent Billy and carries it off well. He manages to make Billy's hopes urgently real while still maintaining a quiet, touching dignity.

Kelly J. Thomas and Elisabeth Lehr play a pair of widowed general-store owners. Thomas' other-worldliness comfortably balances Lehr's more controlling character. Together, they capture the essence of worrisome Irish foster parents. But Lehr pushes too forcefully in her attempt to deliver one of the playwright's emotional wallops late in the performance.

The always-solid John Alexander embodies a Johnnypateenmike who is equal parts sleazy, obnoxious and delightful. His scene with his drunken Mammy—in a pitch-perfect, well-crafted performance by Ruth Wallman—is one of the evening's many highlights.

As Bartley, Colin Cramer gives a charming, if stilted, performance. His winning smile and youthful innocence compensate for his uneven comedic timing, however. Kenneth Wade is also quite likable as the Doctor who, unfortunately, never seems to be taken seriously.

Seth Jarvis is wonderfully subdued as Babby Bobby. There is another story being told behind his eyes; his moments onstage are frequently riveting, especially in his moody interactions with Cripple Billy.

Every actor in this finely tuned ensemble has scene-stealing moments, but none surpasses Alexandra Sevakian. Her Helen is a spitfire ever on the go, frightening in her commitment to violence, while her smile simultaneously chills and charms.

Bob Wolff's multi-tiered set maximizes the performance space nicely. But aside from a shimmering water effect in Act One, Bill Kneen's rudimentary light design fails to add much, if any, atmosphere.

Director Joanne Farrell and her ensemble clearly love this play, and she handles it with an agile hand. The pace provides a nice equilibrium between the play's brash and quiet moments.

A simply staged but highly effective scene in Act Two shows the majority of the cast watching a movie. As in any group viewing experience, some are paying attention to the film, others are paying attention to each other. It's a beautifully timed and hysterically acted study in human relationships.

Minor quibbles aside -- it's a shame, for example, that Farrell's scene transitions aren't covered by music -- Champlain Players' *Cripple of Inishmaan* portrays an admirable array of diverse, deeply developed characters from one of the most wickedly funny and heartbreaking playwrights working today.