

Champlain Production Highlights Funny Side of Cripple

REVIEW by Dan Wolfe

BURLINGTON—Champlain Theatre opened Martin McDonagh's *The Cripple of Inishmaan* last Thursday evening in the Alumni Auditorium of Champlain College. It was fitting that the opening night should have been St. Patrick's Day, for this is an Irish play, sure.

The play is set in the 1930's in Ireland, and deals with the impact of the visit of a Hollywood director who has come to film in Ireland. The title character, Cripple Billy, figures a way to get to meet the director, and goes off to Hollywood. He, of course, returns sadder if not necessarily wiser, and the flow of the stream of their lives goes on.

The production is a good one. Director Joanne Farrell cast well, using some of the players from the former production, and they didn't disappoint. It's a script, by the by, that sounds like one of those sure-fire radio scripts for, say, Jack Benny, with running jokes that became funnier with each repetition. It could have, and indeed has had, more deeply troubled readings of the text than this production.

Particularly, stand-outs were Ruth Wallman as Mammy and John David Alexander as Johnypateenmike. Waldman gave one of the most effective and funny performances of her career as Mammy. It was a totally balanced performance of a part that could at any moment have slipped into cheap theatrics, but Wallman made certain that she stayed within the narrow bounds of the part, and she shone. Alexander has become one of the most dependable professional actors in Vermont. He is greatly talented. His playing of Johnypateenmike, a gatherer of gossip which he trades for food and drink, was exemplary, and he and Wallman, as his old mother, played off one another, to the benefit of the entire play.

The balance of the cast was good: Kelly Thomas turned in a finely-etched portrait of Kate Osbourne, with a wonderful brogue that never slipped; Elisabeth Lehr played her sister, Eileen, whose accent came and went throughout the play, but whose scenes with the young boy Bartley played by Colin Cramer were sure-fire; Jason Briody's accent went a bit out of tuning from time to time, but he had the right moves as Cripple Billy; Seth Jarvis turned in a very strong performance as Babby Bobby; Kenneth Wade, an accomplished actor, was an excellent Doctor McSharry; Alexandra Sevakian as Slippery Helen McCormick, could have looked behind her character's foul language to see why she is masking her inner person with words that would make a sailor blush, because without this more subtle character delineation, her agreeing to walk out with Cripple Billy.

The show works and deserves all of the laughs that it garners. It plays this week from tonight through Saturday, March 26.