

A CurtainUp Los Angeles Review

Poor Beast in the Rain

By Laura Hitchcock

*Yeh, I felt like some poor beast that had been left out
too long in the rain. Yeh'd forgotten me, yeh see.
Yeh'd forgotten all about me.— Molly*

Billy Roche's award-winning play is set in a prosaic betting shop in Wexford, Ireland, in the mid-1980s and slashed with unaffected poetry that cuts to the souls of its people.

"It seems to be a mortal sin these days to want to stay where yeh are, " mourns Steven (Michael O'Hagan) whose wife fled to England with Danger Doyle (Andrew Connolly) a decade ago, leaving behind their now teen-age daughter Eileen (Kate Steele). Eileen helps in her Dad's betting shop where she is adored by her life-long friend Georgie.(Christopher Carley). Floors are mopped by pretty Molly (Joanne Whalley), still mourning the loss of Danger and unable to make Steven see her as a substitute for his lost love. Lending lively ballast to these yearning characters is Joe (Kevin Kearns), an ebullient fellow who seems perfectly happy to be who he is and where he is. When his tall tales are punctured, we see them for the masks they are. Kearns adds an amusing fillip by zipping up his fly whenever he comes out of the Men's Room. It's the week-end of the All-Ireland Hurling Finals and Danger Doyle has returned, purportedly to see them, but actually to bring Eileen back to London to visit her mother.

The multi-generational cast enriches the picture of this small provincial city. Roche doesn't bother with too many details. We don't know why Danger is so respected and equally despised for running off with Steven's wife. He works in an English factory now, but has a dignity that projects his appeal in the town. We don't know what Eileen's mammy does, if anything. Details don't seem to be what Roche is after. Aided by the intuitive direction of Wilson Millam, he projects mood, ambiance, the universal appeal of leaving home and its opposite. It's a picture of those who go and those who stay and the question is, which of those two will young Eileen turn out to be?

The excellent cast is headed by Joanne Whalley, sensuous and sensitive as the embittered Molly; Kevin Kearns, who brings humor and exuberance to Joe; Andrew Connolly, who has a presence projecting the controlled wildness of Danger beneath a stoic exterior. Michael O'Hagan is especially poignant in Steven's final speech, summing up his sorrow and the incomprehension of those who stay. Christopher Carley's young Georgie embodies mute devotion and Kate Steele's is youthful and torn as Eileen.

Laura Fine Hawkes' realistic set design and May Routh's period costumes are enhanced by J. Kent Inasy's mellow lighting. Tony-nominated director Wilson Milam brings a sure sense of place to the production, letting the currents that drive his characters flow with unaffected passion and loss.

This is the first production of The Salem K Theatre Company. It bodes well for the rest of its season.

POOR BEAST IN THE RAIN

Playwright: Billy Roche

Director: Wilson Milam

Cast: Joanne Whalley (Molly), Kevin Kearns (Joe), Andrew Connolly (Danger), Michael O'Hagan (Steven), Kate Steele (Eileen), Christopher Carley (Georgie).

Set Design: Laura Fine Hawkes

Lighting Design: J. Kent Inasy

Costume Design: May Routh

Sound Design: Eric Snodgrass

Running Time: Two hours, one intermission

Running Dates: February 8-March 16, 2008

Where: The Matrix Theatre, 7657 Melrose Avenue, Los Angeles, Reservations: (323) 960-4420.

Reviewed by Laura Hitchcock on February 8.