

LOS ANGELES TIMES
CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK - CHARLES MCNULTY

February 24, 2008

L.A. stages' 2008 openers set the bar high for the months to come. The new year has been gloriously keeping its promise: In the first two months of 2008, we've been treated to full-bodied storytelling.

Operating in a more lyrical register, Billy Roche's "Poor Beast in the Rain," the inaugural offering of the Salem K Theatre Company, has the ring of a Gallic Tennessee Williams. Try as you may to remain detached from the dramatized fray, the emotional tug lures you in.

Set in a betting shop in a small Irish town, the play revolves around the weekend of an all-Irish football final, a time of great pride, drunken celebration and treacherous remembrance. Sporting events mark time, and this one has drawn back the forbiddingly named Danger Doyle (Andrew Connolly), the scandal-ridden seducer who years ago absconded with the wife of the betting shop owner. Life in uneventful Wexford hasn't been the same since.

Steven (Michael O'Hagan), the lonely, retiring proprietor, would prefer to live out his day unmolested by any more change. His daughter, Eileen (Kate Steele), has become (out of necessity) the public face of this operation. This competent young woman is sought after by Georgie (Christopher Carley), a likable doofus with a singing voice that's renowned throughout the town, but she doesn't seem quite ready to settle for local obscurity.

Danger discreetly informs Eileen that her mother is not holding up well and is dying to see her. Would she go with him back to London to comfort her? This stealthy conundrum proceeds under the watchful eye of Molly (the sensational Joanne Whalley, pouncing with the deliberation of a cat on her eighth life). A char in the betting parlor, she possesses an acid-spewing tongue and a smoldering passion for Danger that won't burn out. Not a nuance gets past her, and as the various conflicts among these characters are brought to a head, she makes sure that no one escapes a confrontation with the stark truth.

The play, part of Roche's critically praised "Wexford Trilogy," was first performed in London in 1989 but is only now receiving its Los Angeles premiere at the Matrix Theatre. If it took this long to get an American staging this good, the wait was worth it. Directed by Wilson Milam, who did such a memorable job with Martin McDonagh's "The Lieutenant of Inishmore" on Broadway in 2006, and featuring top-notch ensemble work, the production delivers what only the theater can -- an embodiment of poetry.

Yes, "Poor Beast" has an underlying dilemma that borders on the quaint. But it's also beautifully observed and tenderly affecting. This is usually a rare feat, but the remarkable development of the last couple of months is the bountiful number of such occasions.