

Ire-Land: "The Beauty Queen of Leenane," at the Village Theatre through October 7

Written by Thom White

Monday, 01 October 2012 06:00



The Irish accents are so good in New Ground Theatre's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* that, during Friday night's performance, it actually took me a while to understand the actors – particularly Susan Perrin-Sallak and Melissa Anderson Clark, who play the mother and daughter at the center of the play. It took me about as long to also understand the reason playwright Martin McDonagh's work has won so many awards, as I found the story a bit slow and dull at first, though it gradually built to a punch that I didn't see coming despite (as I recognized in hindsight) it being clearly foreshadowed.

Directed here by David Turley and set in a small town in Ireland in the 1990s, *Beauty Queen* takes place almost entirely in the claustrophobic kitchen of Mag Folan (Perrin-Sallak), an elderly woman maintaining a demanding, hurtful, condescending relationship with her 40-year-old daughter Maureen (Anderson Clark). Having spent time in a mental hospital following an emotional breakdown, Maureen lives with her mother to help care for the elderly woman, though she doesn't do so with any bit of a helpful smile.



Perrin-Sallak, whom I adored in New Ground's *Souvenir* last year, manages to play evil without making her a caricature. Her Mag is a foul woman who does horribly manipulative things to her daughter, but Perrin-Sallak keeps her under control, giving an exceptional performance as a realistically vile woman. Anderson Clark, too, does notably well as Maureen, exuding an obvious impatience with making tea and porridge and being confined with her mother in their cramped cottage, complaining about her situation, and doing little things to irritate her mother (such as leaving lumps in her daily doses of the dietary supplement Complian).

Maureen comes to life, though, when a childhood friend and neighbor comes to visit some 20 years after they've last seen each other. Meeting again at a town social, Maureen brings Pato Dooley (Erik Finch) home with her, where they consummate their relationship. As the two talk in the kitchen, there's an undeniable sense of unworthiness and timid enjoyment in Anderson Clark's performance, as Maureen sees a glimmer of hope for escaping her tortured existence. And Finch's Pato – though the actor struggles a bit with his Irish accent and has a forced, nervous-tic chuckle in his talks with Maureen – is eventually revealed to be a gentle, patient,

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loving man, the sort anyone might long to have as a husband.

In addition to directing, Turley also portrays Pato's brother Ray here, and gets to play the most comedic moments in this dark comedy. The actor generally excels at playing frustration and anger with great humor, a skill he employs well here, and Ray's annoyed bickering with Mag supplies the most amusing moments of the evening.



There isn't a designer listed in the show's program, but whomever costumed the production did a fine job of matching the clothes to the characters' personalities. Maureen, in particular, stands out for her plain, frumpy look, as she's frequently dressed in a T-shirt that's a size or two too big and covered by an ugly cardigan sweater. (Anderson Clark's character also wears minimal makeup and a hairstyle that looks like it took little effort to achieve.) Set designer Michael McPeters, meanwhile, deserves kudos for his attention to detail, especially for what looks like knob and tube wiring for the lights in the cottage, an element that's true to the play's time and place.

It's somewhat unfortunate that I can't praise Turley and his cast for their best work in the production, as it would require my giving too much away about where the plot takes Mag and Maureen. Suffice it to say that New Ground Theatre's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* ends up delivering a horrific thrill due to its powerful material and the actors' powerful performances.

The Beauty Queen of Leenane runs at the Village Theatre (2113 East 11th Street, Village of East Davenport) through October 7, and information and tickets are available by calling (563)326-7529 or visiting NewGroundTheatre.org.