

Cultural Daily

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Cyprus Avenue: Irish Eyes Aren't Smiling

David Sheward · Wednesday, July 11th, 2018

Though it takes place in Northern Ireland, *Cyprus Avenue*, the shockingly dark comedy now at the Public Theater after acclaimed runs in Dublin and London, addresses issues of violence, racism, and nationalism afflicting many other parts of Europe and the US. The playwright, the ironically named David Ireland, satirizes bigotry and the death-struggle between Protestants and Catholics in his native land, but the venom could be found anywhere hatred motivates violence.



Stephen Rea and Chris Corrigan in *Cyprus Avenue*.

Credit: Ros Cavanagh

The main character is Eric Miller (a deceptively subtle Stephen Rea), a staunch Loyalist Protestant driven to extremes by his abhorrence of Catholics and Irish separatists. Obsessed by what he perceives as infringements on his cultural heritage, Eric believes his new baby granddaughter is really Gerry Adams, the leader of Sinn Féin, the Irish Republican political party. This absurd delusion is symbolic of Eric's creeping fear that he is as Irish as the hated Adams. (Loyalists identify themselves as being part of Great Britain rather than Gaelic). Like a demented Archie Bunker, Eric rails against Irish Republicans, spewing stereotypes and labelling them as "Fenians," finally exploding in an unbelievable series of violent acts. The action is framed by Eric's sessions with a psychiatrist, a young woman of African descent, allowing the protagonist to pour out even more repellant slurs.

The first hour of this intermissionless piece is scathingly funny with Eric drawing a beard on the offending infant and engaging in a bizarre debate on murder and celebrities with a young man he encounters in a park. The latter is bent on launching a career as a terrorist and wants to do it right. Ireland's humor is effective in exposing the irrationality of Eric's racism, but the themes become repetitive and lose their sting after a while. Events takes a decidedly sinister turn at the sixty-minute mark as the main character's anti-Catholic barbs are replaced with gruesome physical acts. (At the performance attended, three elderly women walked out at this point.)



Amy Molloy and Stephen Rea in *Cyprus Avenue*.

Credit: Ros Kavanagh

Vicky Featherstone directs her cast—three are holdovers from the British production, two are American newcomers—to maintain a straightforward demeanor so that the climactic Martin McDonagh-like orgy of killing comes as a shock and the audience's laughter sticks in our

collective throats. Unfortunately, Ireland lays on the bloodiness too thick and the impact is lost amid the groans of disgust. Kudos to Rea for keeping Eric from turning into a total monster and carefully charting the slow takeover of his humanity by his demons. He orchestrates several long monologues of rage without becoming hysterical. As the would-be terrorist, Chris Corrigan similarly injects unexpected humor into his character's repellant rants as he suddenly offers a capsule review of a Tom Cruise movie while threatening to shoot Eric. Roanoke Adekoluejo as the therapist, Andrea Irvine as Eric's wife, and Amy Molloy as his daughter are stuck with reacting to the multiple outrages. Lizzie Clachan created the sterile, all-white environment depicting the doctor's office and Eric's tony Belfast living room (Cyprus Avenue is a ritzy address in that city). Gradually it becomes a mud-splattered battlefield.

Ireland bravely treads where few dramatists dare venture. Without revealing too much, suffice it to say only Edward Bond with *Saved* and Neil Labute with *The Distance from Here* come to mind as contemporary examples of depictions of such brutality. Full marks for boldness. The play wounds and cuts with jagged laughter, but its pervading bleakness overwhelms the message of tolerance.

June 25—July 29. Public Theater, 425 Lafayette St., NYC. Tue—Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 2pm. Running time: one hour and 45 mins. with no intermission. \$85. (212) 967-7555. www.publictheater.org.

This review has previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com and Theaterlife.com.

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