

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Down and Out in Idaho and Ireland

David Sheward · Wednesday, January 1st, 2020

Crushing economic forces devastate two communities in a pair of Off-Broadway productions. How the characters deal with these financial blows vary as does the level of credibility and connection. Samuel D. Hunter continues to document the disenfranchised of his home state Idaho in *Greater Clements* at Lincoln Center's Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater, while some of the creative team behind the hit *Once* revisit the same locale (depressing Dublin) for another screen-to-stage examination of music transforming blighted lives with *Sing Street* at New York Theater Workshop.



Judith Ivey and Ken Marasaki in *Greater Clements*.

Credit: Matthew Murphy

As he did in such works as *Lewiston/Clarkston*, *Pocatello*, and *A Bright New Boise*, Hunter feelingly chronicles average Americans coping with tragedy as best they can. (Other recent playwrights to offer similar assessments of our current class struggle include Lynn Nottage with *Sweat* and David Lindsay-Abaire with *Good People*.) The hardy pioneer stock of previous generations is evoked as a tragic echo of faded glory while the present-day citizens of tiny towns in the vast western states reel from the results of corporate greed and upper-class indifference. The plight of Clements, a battered, once thriving mining town parallels that of our polarized country. Rather than deal with restrictions imposed by wealthy vacation homeowners, the working-class Clementines have voted to unincorporate, much as Trumpsters want to burn down the government out of mistrust and fear. Local civic services are terminated and the lights literally go out in the town.

Caught in the middle of the conflict is hard-working, 65-ish Maggie (the magnificent Judith Ivey), whose family-owned mining museum is about to go under. Her marriage ended after her husband came out as gay and her psychologically struggling, directionless son Joe (a brilliantly frenetic Edmund Donovan) is back home after spending time in a mental hospital and homeless on the streets of Anchorage, Alaska.



Haley Sakamoto and Edmund Donovan in *Greater Clements*.

Credit: Matthew Murphy

The plot-engine of the play is Maggie's conflict between staying in dying Clements or chucking it all to join her high-school sweetheart, Billy (tender Ken Narasaki) in another part of Idaho. But Billy has issues of his own including a cancer diagnosis, an alcoholic son and a withdrawn, suicidal

granddaughter (subtly forlorn Haley Sakamoto). We also look into the difficult lives of lonely Wayne (sturdy Andrew Garman), the town's lone law officer representing the vestiges of authority, and frustrated Olivia (appropriately interfering Nina Hellman), a friend who symbolizes the negative, but well-meaning voices aligned against Maggie. When Olivia confronts Maggie over a vital vote (not for President, but the similarities are striking), their searing scene, unflinchingly written by Hunter and played by Ivey and Hellman, recreates our central national dilemma—citizens feeling abandoned by everything they once believed in. Kate MacCluggage provides an intriguing coda in a cameo as a well-off, oblivious weekender.

Despite a melodramatic finish, Hunter delivers a compassionate portrait of ordinary people trapped by huge social and political forces beyond their control. Director Davis McCallum and the exemplary cast carefully balance pathos with sharply objective observation. Dane Lafferty's massive set with its elevators, girders, and shafts makes Maggie's home and museum into a mine of buried hopes.

The inhabitants of 1980s Dublin are just as economically and emotionally depressed as those of Greater Clements, Idaho. Derived from the 2016 film, *Sing Street* employs tropes parallel to the Tony-winning musical *Once*, which was also based on a movie and began life at New York Theater Workshop. These characters also seek to alleviate their sorrow through musical means. In addition, the shows have the same book writer (Enda Walsh) and John Carney, who wrote the *Sing Street* original screenplay and collaborated on the score with Gary Clark, also wrote and directed the *Once* screen version.



Zara Devlin and Brenock O'Connor in *Sing Street*.

Credit: Matthew Murphy

Just as the Idaho folks have nowhere to go, teenager Conor (simultaneously shy and charismatic Brenock O'Connor) and his friends and family are trapped. His dad Robert cannot find work as an architect, mom Penny seeks comfort in an affair with her boss, older brother Brendan is so downhearted he can't even leave the house and sister Anne buries herself in books as her college education is the only ticket out. As the family budget gets tighter, Conor is forced to attend a public-run, Christian Brothers school, Synge Street, named for the author of *Playboy of the Western World*, another work center on coping with Gaelic poverty.

To impress the mysterious, aspiring model Raphina (sparkling Zara Devlin), Conor forms a rock band—Sing Street, get it?—but the thrown-together group soon becomes a means of expression and defiance of the tyrannical Brother Baxter (villainous Martin Moran) who rules Conor's school with an iron fist.



The cast of *Sing Street*.

Credit: Matthew Murphy

Walsh's book attempts to cram in too much to be truly effective. Several of the subplots and characters are briefly introduced—such as the brutal and closeted gay Barry, the nerdish Eamon, backstories for Brendan, Brother Baxter, and Conor's parents—but never fully developed. There is also confusion between Penny and Eamon's mother Sandra, a piano teacher who inspires Conor's band, since the actresses playing them have similar looks and costumes. The storyline is overly familiar—the band gets their big rebellious confrontation, the lead youngsters escape their crushing

environment—and the acting is uneven. O'Connor and Devlin are attractive and compelling and Johnny Newcomb's Barry sizzles with repressed rage, but Gus Halper's Brendan plays every line at full volume and Moran's nasty authority figure is one-dimensional. But the tunes by Carney and Clark are infectious and reflect the spontaneous joy of the British New Wave pop sound of the era and Rebecca Taichman's fluid, flexible staging compensates for any story deficiencies. It's not an entirely well-maintained *Street*, but a pleasant enough place to spend some time.

Greater Clements: Dec. 9—Jan. 19. Lincoln Center Theater at the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater, 150 W. 65th St., NYC. Tue 7:30pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu—Fri 7:30pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: two hours and 50 mins. including two intermissions. \$92. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

Sing Street: Dec. 16—Jan. 26. New York Theater Workshop, 79 E. 4th St., NYC. Tue—Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 2pm & 8pm. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission. \$125. (212) 460-5475. www.nytw.org.

This review previously appeared on Theaterlife.com.

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