

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Families in Crisis on and Off-Broadway

David Sheward · Wednesday, October 31st, 2018

Families reacting to crises are the fodder for three current productions, one on Broadway and two Off, two of them are originally from London and one an American original. While all have moments of touching truth, only one has the complete package of gripping theatricality without the excess of melodrama.

Jez Butterworth's *The Ferryman* sails onto Broadway after a triumphant, award-grabbing run on the West End like a gigantic ship full of dramatic delights and a huge passenger list. The cast is comprised of 22 human actors (most from the London production) a baby among them, plus a brace of animals including a goose and a number of rabbits. Similar to his other award-winning symbolic drama *Jerusalem* which told the story of a changing England through the lens of a charismatic drug dealer's experiences, *Ferryman* recounts the 20th century history of Northern Ireland via the tragic and comic journeys of a large farming family.



Niall Wright, Matilda Lawler, Justin Edwards, Mark Lambert, Fra Fee, and Willow McCarthy in *The Ferryman*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

From the bittersweet visions of elderly aunts and uncles to the harrowing struggles of younger generations, Butterworth chronicles the rending wrenchings of the Carney clan as they are torn between the brutal British occupation and the violence of the Irish Republican Army. Like *Jerusalem*, the focus is a single day—the all-important harvesting of the vital wheat crop, celebrated with a huge meal, songs, dance, and other rituals. (Rob Howell designed the huge, rambling farmhouse set, exquisitely detailed with drawings of the many Carney kiddies.) But on this 1981 harvest fete, the family must contend with the discovery of the body of second son Seamus, missing for a decade, but it appears he was a victim of IRA retribution for an unnamed transgression.

A lot happens in the play's three-hour-plus running time—an unravelling love triangle, a proposal, secrets revealed, murders and attempted murders, recollections of the past, a bone-chilling visit from the mysterious Mr. Muldoon, head of the local IRA division—all superbly orchestrated by director Sam Mendes so the numerous events, characters, and relationships are all perfectly clear and pass at a steady clip.



Willow McCarthy, Brooklyn Shuck, and Dearbhla Molloy in *The Ferryman*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

The massive ensemble is stuffed with vivid and life-like performances. It's difficult to pick stand-outs in an almost uniformly magnificent company, but Dearbhla Molloy's acidic, chain-smoking Aunt Pat, Fionnula Flanagan's seemingly senile yet revilingly prescient Aunt Maggie, and Justin Edwards' heartbreaking funny child-like handyman were my favorites. Paddy Considine is masterfully commanding and conflicted as Quinn, the head of the clan who torn between family loyalty and devotion to the freedom of his country. Laura Donnelly is just as heart-rippingly torn as Caitlin, Seamus' wife who harbors a not-too-hidden passion for her brother-in-law Quinn. There's also Mark Lambert's gleefully gabby Uncle Pat, Tom Glynn-Carney's explosive cousin Shane, and Stuart Graham's smoothly menacing Muldoon. That's just a portion of the magnificently moving fireworks inshore at the *Ferryman*.



Purva Bedi, Shazi Raja, and Angel Desai in *India Pale Ale*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Jaclyn Backhaus' *India Pale Ale* at Manhattan Theatre Club's City Center stage is a similar family portrait with tragedy and comedy mixed together over bonding rituals. Its heart is in the right place, but Backhaus pushes all her tensions and conflicts right to the surface in addition we can hear the author's voice and not the characters' through most of the play. Set in Wisconsin, the familiar plot centers on the Batra family of Punjabi descent with several generations' residence in the Midwest. Eldest daughter Basminder or "Boz" (an energetic and charismatic Shazi Raja) announces her intention to leave her traditional rural home to open a bar in the nearby college city of Madison during the Sikh lager feast celebrating her brother Iggy's engagement. She pursues her dream, but a racist attack involving the family brings her back and the central question becomes will she stay or go.

The characters spend too much time telling each other how they should feel rather than simply reacting to the situation. There is a fascinating and thoughtful scene with Boz explaining her cultural struggles to a friendly Caucasian Madison bar patron (funny Nate Miller) who might become a love interest. But most of the rest of the play, directed with straightforward simplicity by Will David, feels didactic and forced. A legendary pirate ancestor haunts the proceedings in fantasy sequences and in rather annoying family stories with too many "yarghs."

The final moments, a plea for tolerance delivered by Boz's mother (subtle and sweet Purva Bedi) directly to the audience, along with the actors passing out samosa meat patties, is certainly admirable, but feels more like a "teachable moment" than truthful drama.



Mare Winningham and Stephen Bogardus in *Girl from the North Country*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

The family in *The Girl from the North Country* faces economic woes and community destruction to the tune of Bob Dylan songs. Set in Depression-era Duluth, Minnesota (Dylan's hometown), Conor McPherson's musical drama was a huge hit in London and is now at the Public with an American cast and the playwright directing. While Dylan's soulful canon is given throbbing intensity by a passionate cast in stirring orchestrations by Simon Hale and McPherson, the plot is like a soap opera with the songs shoehorned in. The songs such as "Like a Rolling Stone" and "Forever Young" evoke such a specific cultural moment, they feel out of place in McPherson's 1930s

melodrama. Narrated by kindly Dr. Walker (Robert Joy), the story focuses on the down-at-heels boarding house run by Nick Laine (Stephen Bogardus) whose wife Elizabeth (a magnificent Mare Winningham) has lost her mental balance. Like Aunt Pat and Aunt Maggie in *The Ferryman*, she becomes the truth teller in world thrown off kilter. The white couple's adopted African-American daughter (in this era???) Marianne (lovely-voiced Kimber Sprawl) is sought after by elderly shoe-store owner Mr. Perry (Tom Nelis) while the son Gene (Colton Ryan), a would-be writer, drowns in alcohol. The boarders include a widow (salty, soulful Jeanette Bayardelle), openly in an affair with Nick, an ex-boxer (magnetic Sydney James Harcourt), a sly con man (David Pittu), and a battling couple (Marc Kudish and Luba Mason) with an psychologically limited son (Todd Almond).

McPherson's staging is flexible and graceful with cast members joining the orchestra and scenes flowing smoothly on Rae Smith's homey set. Huge photos of the frozen Midwestern landscape and Mark Henderson's lighting create memorable stage pictures. Musically and movement-wise, *Girl* scores but the characters are flat and clichéd. The show is an improvement over Broadway's previous Dylan musical, Twyla Tharp's 2006 misfire *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, it fails to completely capture the essence of the Nobel Prize-winning legend.

The Ferryman: Oct. 21—Feb. 17. Bernard B. Jacobs Theatre, 242 W. 45th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 1pm & 7:30pm, Thu—Fri 7pm, Sat 1pm & 7:30pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: three hours and 15 mins. including intermission. \$59—\$175. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

India Pale Ale: Oct. 23—Nov. 18. Manhattan Theatre Club at the City Center Stage I, 131 W. 55th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 7pm, Thu—Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission. \$69—\$89. (212) 581-1212. www.nycitycenter.org.

The Girl from the North Country: Oct. 1—Dec. 23. Public Theater, 425 Lafayette St., NYC. Tue—Fri 7:30pm, Sat—Sun 1:30pm & 7:30pm. Running time: two hours and 30 mins. including intermission. \$120. (212) 967-7555. www.publictheater.org.

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