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Martin McDonagh Play Hangs Between Farce and Horror

David Sheward · Wednesday, February 14th, 2018

Martin McDonagh takes the phrase "gallows humor" a bit too literally in his new play *Hangmen*, now at the Atlantic Theater Company after hit London runs at the Royal Court and in the West End. As in his previous stage work such as *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* and his Oscar-nominated film *Three Billboards Outside of Ebbing, Missouri*, the darkly comic playwright offers grisly scenarios of violence and vengeance replete with ironic and ambiguous twists. Just like his earlier plays and films, *Hangmen* is entertaining, well-structured and funny, but it follows a familiar template and has little new to say other than McDonagh's usual refrain of "People are bloodthirsty and given half a chance, they'll slice your throat open over the pettiest little thing, or worse, for no reason at all."

Mark Addy in *Hangmen*.
Credit: Ahron R. Foster

Set in the north of England rather than his usual desolate Irish countryside, the play focuses on bellicose braggart Harry Wade (an Oliver Hardy-like Mark Addy), a purveyor of the titular trade, and Peter Mooney (the oily Johnny Flynn), a charming stranger with a mysterious background. The action takes place mostly in Harry's pub which he runs as a sideline in 1965 after hanging has been abolished in the United Kingdom. As Harry boasts of his macabre record of executions to a crew of admiring cronies, the enigmatic Mooney arrives and vaguely threatens the former hangman and his family consisting of Harry's dissatisfied wife Alice (a delightfully shrewish Sally Rogers) and moody daughter Shirley (Gaby French who displays great comic timing). There are also visits from Syd (snivelling Reece Shearsmith), Harry's mousey former assistant, and Albert Pierpoint (domineering Maxwell Caulfield), a rival nooseman whose ego is even bigger than Harry's, each with their own agenda. Without divulging any spoilers, a few people wind up dead and we never find out certain characters' motivations.

There are several hilariously macabre sequences dealing with corpses and torture, but the characters are too close to archetypes from other works. Harry is a puffed-up buffoon riding for a fall not unlike Jackie Gleason's Ralph Kramden of *The Honeymooners* (Mark Addy has played Kramden knock-off Fred Flintstone in the film *The Flintsontes in Viva Rock Vegas*). Alice is the nagging wife who's the real boss—she's even got the same name as her model in the classic TV sitcom. Syd is the dimwitted second banana akin to Art Carney's Ed Norton. Mooney is the enigmatic, vaguely threatening intruder we all know from the plays of Joe Orton and Harold Pinter. (I found Flynn more annoying than scary.) Mooney even self-consciously describes himself as "menacing." Hint to playwright—if a character has to describe himself as menacing, then he's

probably not going to be.



Johnny Flynn and Gaby French in *Hangmen.*
Credit: Ahron R. Foster

Matthew Dunster's direction is slickly professional and well-paced and the cast which combines members of the original British troupe with American newcomers, exhibits exquisite comic characterization and timing. There is talk that the play may move to Broadway after its sold-out, Atlantic Theater Company run, but *Hangmen* feels more like a retread of familiar McDonagh themes and sitcom tropes rather than a frightening glimpse of humanity's dark nature. Save your money and see the author's much more effective *Three Billboards.*

Feb. 5—March 7. Atlantic Theater Company at the Linda Gross Theater, 336 W. 20th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu—Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 2pm. Running time: two hours and 15 mins. including intermission. $90. (866) 811-4111. www.ovationtix.com.

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