Cultural Daily

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The Night (Very Much Alive) at the Geffen Playhouse

Sylvie · Wednesday, February 18th, 2015

There is nothing quite like a good Irish play, and after seeing *The Night Alive,* which is having its West Coast premiere at the Geffen Playhouse, it's impossible not to note that there is probably nothing quite like a Conor McPherson play either. So now let's compare him to the other Irish playwrights who have been the source of so much pleasure over the years: Sean O'Casey, J. M. Synge, Brian Friel, Yeats, Beckett, Joyce, and of course Shaw. In their own individual styles, they all had or have an infinite capacity for writing about what seems like nothing in particular that invariably turns out to be something quite particular — and profoundly human.

That is exactly what happens in the lives of Tommy, Maurice, Doc, Aimee and one slippery character named Kenneth. Tommy rents a room in his uncle Maurice's house. You might say that they are the quintessential odd couple. Maurice is the neat-nick and exemplary good citizen, while Tommy is the hand-to-mouth good soul, whose laxity with hygiene and general untidiness even a cockroach might wish to avoid.

Now and then, Tommy shares his disheveled quarters with a younger gentle ne'er-do-well named Doc (short for Brian, as he fails, at some length, to explain). And then, one night, Tommy walks home with a young woman named Aimee.

Aimee has a bloody nose and good-hearted Tommy has just rescued her from some nasty bloke who did a good job of trying to break it. And there's your plot.

Not much you say? No, not much. But in McPherson's world, that doesn't matter, because in the midst of all the nonchalance, the unwashed dishes, the unmade beds, the lazy calendar, the lack of money and the absence of food in the house, these characters deliver one heck of an entertaining evening of theatre. They're a good-humored bunch, most of them, trapped in a dysfunctional world that doesn't seem to get much in the way of their happy-go-lucky life.

The fascinating part is that serious things *do* happen to them, even an incident or two that would totally rattle the rest of us. But these incidents won't be revealed here. (Why spoil a good play?) The marvel of *The Night Alive* is the ability of its denizens to overlook the bad — step right over it as it were — and create a surprising amount of *good* in its wake.

Despite McPherson's claims to the contrary ("Language in my hands is not a great tool. I believe that audiences communicate with plays and performers on stage by telepathy"), this play is about words, lots of them *non sequitur*, many words shared that, somehow, thanks to a good deal of body language and communicative silences (to say nothing of terrific acting), end up creating an

astonishing amount of meaning.

In a program interview, director Randall Arney, who has done a terrific job of staging this production, reminds us that “a play is more like a blueprint than a finished product. You gotta fill in how it looks and how it lives later.” Which, of course, is true and which, of course, he has done. In addition, he handpicked his actors so exquisitely that it’s hard to imagine a better cast. As a friend succinctly put it in an email: “So nice and well meaning and so on the edge funny. The actors are *superb*.”

Paul Vincent O’Connor is a great, big slob of a Tommy, not old and certainly not stupid, but aged beyond his years by his undirected, sloppy way of living. Dan Donohue as Doc, his younger buddy and not the brightest bulb on the block, is headed in the same direction, but I defy anyone to display more or deeper feeling than he can with a string of pained or frightened or merely disconnected words. Bruised young Aimee, beautifully performed by the willowy Fiona O’Shaughnessy, is the most laconic of this talkative lot. She may be short on verbal eloquence, but not on body language. Whatever she doesn’t say, she still can express so that we understand her. Not entirely telepathy, perhaps, but close.

Paul Vincent O’Connor, (seated) and Denis Arndt in THE NIGHT ALIVE at The Geffen Playhouse.

The least engaging of the group may be Uncle Maurice, nicely filled out by actor Denis Arndt. Maurice flits in and out of the action. He seems needlessly dry and stern at first, a bit of a stick in the mud. But as the play moves on, and especially when he sneaks in a nip or two, he reveals aspects of himself that had not been visible before. In the end, you begin to see how he and Tommy are indeed related.

As for the intruder in this lot, a Mafioso-type named Kenneth, Peter O’Meara makes him as threatening as he needs to be in circumstances that speak for themselves, while our more loquacious other characters fill in any necessary blanks.

Paul Vincent O’Connor (left) and Peter O’Meara in THE NIGHT ALIVE.

These blanks are one of the more unusual aspects of McPherson’s writing. He tells us only what we need to know. No more. There many not be much hot water in the aging pipes of this creaky Dublin house, but there is plenty of figurative hot water to be dealt with in these lives. And yet nothing extraneous is to be found here. Some plot twists remain unexplained simply because… they do not need to be.

Takeshi Kata’s set is a wonder of detailed disorder, just as David Kay Mickelson’s costumes create a world of complete sartorial breakdown. Daniel Ionazzi’s lighting and Richard Woodbury’s sound design (and musical composition) complement the benign chaos that reigns unleashed in this limited universe.

Fiona O’Shaughnessy and Paul Vincent O’Connor in THE NIGHT ALIVE.

One of the biggest surprises in this Irish play is that, while people drink, no one gets really drunk or (with one exception) mean. A genuine sweetness rises like a fog from those well-worn floorboards to envelope all of these tenderly misguided and complicated people, and then drifts

offstage to flood an audience that has been given the chance to meet and get to know them.

Some unexpected talk of stars and black holes and the absence of time seems odd and mysterious, especially since it floats out of Doc's unschooled mouth. But it is is quietly exposed in the end, in an unexpectedly luminous moment. For you to savor and for me to not ruin.

WHAT: ***The Night Alive*** by Conor McPherson.

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays 3 & 8pm; Sundays, 2 & 7pm, now through Match 15.

WHERE: Gil Cates Theater at the Geffen Playhouse, 10886 Le Conte Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90024.

HOW: Tickets $39-$79 (prices subject to change), available at the Geffen box office, at 310.208.5454 or online at www.geffenplayhouse.com. Fees may apply.

Top picture: Paul Vincent O'Connor, Dan Donohue (in the background) and Fiona O'Shaughnessy.

All photos by Michael Lamont.

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