Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Seeking Connection in The Weir

David Sheward · Thursday, July 23rd, 2020

Five lonely people swap ghost stories in a secluded Irish country pub in Connor McPherson's touching play *The Weir*. This woes of this disheartened quintet are strikingly relevant for the COVID-19 era. They are attempting to make human connection despite the psychological barriers that separate them. Shuttered along with all other Broadway and Off-Broadway theaters because of the pandemic, the Irish Repertory Theater has adapted its 2013 staging of the play for remote streaming, subtitled "A Performance on Screen," and created a hybrid between theater and video, emphasizing the isolation of the characters. Each of the five actors filmed their roles in different states from Vermont to North Carolina, performing against green screens (set designer Charlie Corcoron created the atmospheric, homey environment). Director Ciaran O'Reilly has seamlessly woven together the bits and pieces into a cohesive whole, creating the illusion they are all together in the same space.

Dan Butler in *The Weir*.
Credit: Irish Repertory Theater

Originally presented in London in 1997 and then on Broadway in 1999, the play lacks plot, but creates a realistic and moving sense of displacement and isolation. In this remote corner of Ireland, any small event is a cause for excitement. Accompanied by pompous local businessman Finbar, a newcomer named Valerie is expected to make a visit to the sleepy pub run by Brendan and frequented by 60-ish bachelor Jack, and Jim who lives with his elderly mother. The pub is relatively empty these days (another connection to our current pandemic crisis) because it's too early for tourist season and the onslaught of German visitors. Brendan notes he's not even sure if they are German, they could be Danish or Finnish, denoting his loneliness and lack of connection with these transient customers.

Sean Gormley in *The Weir*.
Credit: Irish Repertory Theater

As a scathing wind howls outside, each relates a spooky story of ghosts, fairies, or disembodied voices or strange sounds. Every tale reveals the hidden sorrow of the teller and that of the dispossessed, alcoholic townsfolk. Dan Butler gradually peels away Jack's crusty shell to expose the vulnerable interior as he recalls a youthful romantic disappointment. Tim Ruddy subtly indicates Brendan's alienation with small, telling gestures and details, particularly in the almost off-hand way he explains the boredom he faces when the foreign tourists invade his establishment.

Sean Gormley perfectly captures Finbar's bluster and the desperation it covers. John Keating makes for an endearing Jim, not the sharpest knife in the drawer, but genuinely warm hearted and ready to soften any conflict. Amanda Quaid is especially piercing as Valerie, initially shy but eventually delivering the most heartbreaking story of all with a direct simplicity that is shattering.

Amanda Quaid in *The Weir*.
Credit: Irish Repertory Theater

According to a dictionary search, a weir is "a low dam built across a river to raise the level of water upstream or regulate its flow." The weir is in among a series of photos in the pub, each evoking a memory of early days among the patrons. McPherson's sensitive play likewise evokes a longing for community and connection in this devastating, isolating time. *The Weir* is only available for a few more performances through July 25, it's definitely worth a visit.

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