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Title	For the pleasure of seeing her again by Michel Tremblay, translated by Linda Gaboriau, Peacock Theatre
Author(s)	Lonergan, Patrick
Publication Date	2002
Publication Information	Lonergan, Patrick (2002) For the pleasure of seeing her again by Michel Tremblay, translated by Linda Gaboriau, Peacock Theatre. Irish Theatre Magazine, Spring, 3(11)
Publisher	Irish Theatre Magazine
Link to publisher's version	http://itmarchive.ie/print/
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/6629

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FOR THE PLEASURE OF SEEING HER AGAIN
by Michel Tremblay, translated by Linda Gaboriau
Peacock Theatre
1 February – 9 March 2002;
reviewed 14 February 2002 by Patrick Lonergan

Irish Theatre Magazine, issue 11, summer 2002.

As Michel Tremblay's play begins, we are told that we are not about to see a *Three Sisters* or a *Hamlet*. Instead, we are asked to witness the writer's remembrance of Nana, his mother, whom he is summoning to the stage "for the pleasure of seeing her again." "You will laugh," he promises us, "and you'll cry too" – and when the play concludes ninety minutes later, these words have been proven largely accurate: most of the audience leaves the Peacock smiling, although some remain seated, still in tears after the play's inspiring conclusion.

In a series of short scenes, Tremblay shows how his development as a writer was influenced by his mother's love of invention, exaggeration, and performance. Leading us from his childhood to his mother's death in his early 20s, he presents a beautifully achieved portrait of a woman gifted with an exuberant imagination. Nana's impersonation of family members and her love of romantic novels entertain her son, but also provide her with consolation from a life she finds stifling. Tremblay's point is simple: Chekhov and Shakespeare may have influenced his writing, but his mother shaped his imagination. The play therefore is a touching defence of the place of – and the necessity for – the theatrical in everyday life.

Gordon McCall's light-handed direction, aided by the subtlety of Tony Wakefield's lighting and Paul McCauley's design, ensures that the attention of the audience is focussed on Maria McDermottroe's Nana. This places considerable responsibility for the play's success on McDermottroe – which she carries brilliantly, capturing the restlessness of Nana's imagination without indulging in histrionics. She is assisted by the generous restraint of Des Cave, who as the Narrator is happy to allow Nana to monopolise the audience's attention.

This careful pace is maintained until the play's conclusion, when Tremblay attempts to give his mother a theatrical goodbye that poignantly contrasts with the penultimate scene, in which, suffering from terminal illness, Nana admits that she is terrified by an inability to imagine her son's future after her death. This finale draws the play's preoccupations and themes together, and affectingly enacts Tremblay's love for his mother. It was disappointing, therefore, that these last moments seemed rushed, when, as the play's title implies, we ought to have been given the time to take pleasure in Nana's happiness.

For the Pleasure... was written to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of Tremblay's *Les Belles Soeurs*, the controversial play that established his reputation. Written in the Montreal dialect of joul, the play inaugurated the career of a dramatist now regarded as one of the most important figures in the formation of Québécois culture and identity. In 1988, Tremblay caused similar commotion in Scotland when *Les Belles Souers* was translated to a Glaswegian dialect as *The Guid Sisters*, earning Tremblay

the title of "the greatest Scottish playwright Scotland never had". Tremblay's use of language – not to mention his politics – means that he has a great deal in common with Irish dramatists like Synge and O'Casey, but, as *The Guid Sisters* showed, he is also a writer of global importance.

The problem is that an Irish audience unaware of Tremblay's status in Canada will miss a great deal of the significance of *For the Pleasure*. When Nana encourages her son to think for himself, the Peacock audience grins nostalgically at a typical childhood scene, but the Québécois audience before whom this play was premiered would have seen in that encouragement the roots of Tremblay's fierce independence, making the play politically and creatively exciting in ways that an Irish audience simply will not notice. It could therefore be argued that *For the Pleasure* travels with its superficial and sentimental elements intact, but leaves much of its power in Canada.

This difficulty is compounded by a disappointing translation. Linda Gaboriau does not attempt to reproduce Tremblay's joul, instead using a bland English that seems geared towards an international audience. Cave and McDermottroe both showed an instinct to compensate for the script's lack of character by shifting occasionally from their Canadian accents into an Irish intonation and rhythm – to which, interestingly, the Peacock audience responded warmly.

Nevertheless, to present the European premiere of a major play is an impressive declaration of the National Theatre's status in world theatre, and the Abbey deserves credit for its ongoing engagement with theatre from outside Ireland. The success of this engagement must ultimately be judged against the reactions of Irish audiences – and, in this case, the audience responded positively, despite the fact that more could have been done to compensate them for what was lost in the transposition from Montreal to Dublin. Due principally to the charismatic and disciplined performances of Cave and McDermottroe, *For the Pleasure of Seeing Her Again* is a satisfying celebration of the creative imagination, and a beautiful tribute from the playwright to his mother.

