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Measure for Measure
By William Shakespeare
Rattlebag Theatre Company
Civic Theatre Tallaght,
30 October – 23 November
Reviewed 16 November 2002

Henry IV – Part One
By William Shakespeare
Peacock Theatre,
26 November – 11 January
Reviewed 12 December 2002

by Patrick Lonergan

Irish Theatre Magazine, issue 14, Spring 2003

Almost every European country that gained independence after the First World War had one thing in common: with only one exception, they all tried to stimulate the growth of a national literature by commissioning translations of two key texts – the Bible and the works of Shakespeare. There's an interesting implication in this: that, for a nation to form an identity, it has to come to terms with God first, and then Shakespeare. The one exception to this trend was, of course, Ireland which (leaving aside our troublesome attitudes to God), found itself in a strange relationship with Shakespeare: too familiar to be translated, his work was also too English to be comfortably assimilated into our culture.

Eighty years later, the place of Shakespeare in Irish theatre remains complicated, still characterised by a strange unease. We've had Irish versions of Chekhov, Ibsen, Sophocles, and every other giant of world theatre, but we've had few successful productions of Shakespeare. This situation may have something to do with colonialism – but, in recent years, the compulsory status of Shakespeare's works in our school curriculum probably accounts for a greater part of Irish audiences' ambivalence towards him. And this ambivalence is intensifying, with a growing perception among producers that audiences aren't willing to watch Shakespeare without added inducements – celebrities in leading roles, extensive cuts, or gimmicky, gender-bending casting.

These recent productions of *Measure for Measure* and the first part of *Henry IV* show that Irish theatres are attempting to overcome this situation – but that they're also still suffering from it. The production of two of Shakespeare's least performed plays is another example of how, despite the doom and gloom, Irish companies are setting off in encouraging new directions – in this case, by courageously exploring the murkier parts of the Shakespearean canon. However, they also exemplify the lack of confidence Irish producers have in the viability of Shakespearean productions, with both companies emphasising that their work is more than just typical Shakespeare. So from Rattlebag we have a *Measure for Measure* set in 1930s Ireland, and from the Peacock a *Henry IV* edited by Mark O'Rowe.

Of the two, *Henry IV* is the more successful. Within minutes of the performance's commencement, it's clear that we're watching something far superior to the average Irish Shakespeare. Directed by Jimmy Fay, this production has an unusually strong cast, with standout performances from Declan Conlon as a quietly determined Hotspur, Nick Dunning as an impressively regal Henry, and Sean Kearns as a show-stealing Falstaff. The production values are high: we have a sparse set that uses only a small number of props very well, and nicely understated lighting and costume design. Presented in the round, and making full use of the Peacock's wings and backstage, the action envelops the audience, rushing around us at a furious pace.

It's difficult to decide whether this success justifies the decision to edit the text. Although not noted for restraint, Mark O'Rowe is a disciplined writer who has an instinct for rhythmic language, and a decidedly Shakespearean sense of how to use violence on stage. These skills are evident in the quality of his edition of the text. But although O'Rowe does his job well, the success of the production left me wanting more, not less, of the play.

The action begins with Henry IV's regret that, rather than the courageous Hotspur, fate has given him the feckless Prince Hal for a son. The source of the play's dramatic power is Hal's subsequent development from the vapid, irresponsible youth who spends his time joking with Falstaff, to the warrior who can not only match Hotspur, but defeat him. This movement from the tavern to the battlefield should be dramatic and carefully layered – but with the edit the role is so diminished that, despite the best efforts of Tom Murphy, Hal's development seems more like a capricious change of mind than growth of character.

The edit brings formal problems too. We have an hour-long gallop through three-quarters of the play, an interval, and then twenty minutes of swordplay – creating an imbalance in the action. The final act Shakespearean battle always works as a release of tensions built up throughout the play, but here we've had such little time to engage with the characters that it's difficult to care about their fate, or to tune into the action's rhythm.

And I missed the relevance of the play to Ireland. The Welsh rebel Glendower was probably based on Hugh O'Neill, whose own rebellions dominated the period in which the play was first performed. It's not that this should have been emphasised over other elements of the production, but it's a shame that an aspect of the play that can speak directly to an Irish audience was almost entirely cut.

Hibernicising Shakespeare can be taken too far, however, and that's the difficulty with Rattlebag's *Measure for Measure*, which moves the action from Vienna to a loose version of 1930s Dublin. Aesthetically, this proves a good choice, allowing Sonia Haccius to give us fine costumes and a set that moves fluidly from prison cell to convent. It's also a good technical choice: if only some of your cast can convincingly deliver verse, you might as well accept the inevitable and have them all speak in Irish accents. The problem is that, although the transposition to our country's past is handled with creativity and occasional wit, it creates an expectation that the action will be relevant to our present. The production doesn't match that expectation.

In the Shakespearean canon, *Measure for Measure* is problematic, because it poses a moral conundrum without resolving it. Isabella is asked to decide whether she should sacrifice her chastity to save her brother's life but, rather than answering this question, she sidesteps it, instead using trickery to prevent his death. She does so under the influence of the disguised Duke, who manipulates events to ensure that a kind of order is restored by the play's conclusion. But it's a strange order, which involves the union of characters who would be better off apart: Shakespeare leaves us pondering the value of marriage, as well as the motivations of his characters – without giving any indication of what we ought to think. The play's brilliance lies in the fact that it says nothing clearly.

So although, as director Joe Devlin points out, there are parallels between Shakespeare's Vienna and 1930s Dublin, it's difficult to see what the value of the move to Dublin might be – if you're trying to make a statement, it's not a great idea to use a play that makes a virtue of ambivalence. If the intention is to state that sexual suppression was a part of recent Irish history, then that statement is banal and excessively simplistic. Do we really need another Irish production that panders to our pathological desire to laugh at our grandparents' generation? That hammers home the stereotype that, unlike the audience, the pre-1960s Irish were sexually repressed, insular, priest-ridden, too much in awe of DeValera? Perhaps there's no harm in this, but we might be better served by work that invites us to question our own social and sexual mores, not to mention our need for reassurance about our distance from the past.

In any case, the move to Dublin robs the play of much of its power. This is a play that's intentionally unclear in its treatment of themes like sexuality, authority or religion – forcing us to ask questions. Placing those themes in an Irish context does nothing to elucidate our past, instead offering us a perspective of the play that is parochial and reductive. We can't ask questions here; we can only evaluate one interpretation of the text.

Notwithstanding this problem, this was a generally enjoyable production, directed in an easy-going manner, to which the audience responded positively. Isabel Claffey was well cast as a resourceful and assertive Isabella and, as Angelo, Aidan Condrón gave the sleaziest performance I've seen in some time. And there were promising performances throughout the cast. So there was much to enjoy here – but all of it would have been possible without moving the play into the narrow Irish context, despite the aesthetic and technical benefits of doing so.

Both *Henry IV* and *Measure for Measure* might have benefited from avoiding compromises made to attract audiences. But it's important that, with these productions, we're seeing two companies trying to move away from Irish norms, producing rarely performed, difficult plays with conviction and style. Neither company's production was entirely successful, but they indicate a good starting point for any Irish engagement with Shakespeare: the best way of Hibernicising the Bard is not by interpolating superfluous Irish elements into an already rich text, but for Irish theatres to produce Shakespeare excellently.

