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Tilsonburg

By Malachy McKenna
Focus Theatre/Irish Touring Company
Town Hall Theatre, Galway
20 – 22 March 2003
Reviewed 20 March 2003

Shiver

By Declan Hughes
Rough Magic
Project Arts Centre, Dublin
28 March – 19 April 2003
Reviewed 12 April 2003

by Patrick Lonergan

Irish Theatre Magazine, issue 15, summer 2002.

Critics have been declaring Irish playwrighting to be in a state of crisis for most of the last 100 years but, even so, it's hard not to feel glum about the present state of our writing for the stage. The latest plays from established figures have been met with disappointment and occasional hostility; and we've had a glut of formally conservative plays from emerging writers that cover the same narrow territory of dead babies, abusive mothers, and sexually dysfunctional men. It's a pleasant surprise therefore to see two plays, from Declan Hughes and Malachy McKenna, that cover new thematic ground, while emphasising the importance of plot, dialogue and many other characteristics not much seen on the Irish stage recently.

Hughes' *Shiver* is in many ways a counterpoint to *Digging for Fire*, the 1991 play that – with its iconoclastic attitude to Irish stage conventions, and Hughes' ease with popular culture – laid the ground for some of the best Irish theatre of the 1990s. As was the case with that earlier play, *Shiver* focuses on a group of couples. Richard and Jenny (Peter Hanley and Cathy White) have returned from the US to set up an Irish dotcom enterprise, while Marion and Kevin (Cathy Belton and Paul Hickey) are in conflict about Kevin's decision to quit teaching to look after their newborn child. The title of *Digging for Fire* indicated its characters youthful dynamism and curiosity (and the volatility of their relationships) but, in contrast, the title of *Shiver* indicates these older couples' feelings of exposure and isolation, as their lives unravel along with the Irish economy.

Throughout the production, the audience is made complicit with these characters' declining fortunes. The cast – all of whom are wonderful – switch constantly from naturalism to direct, familiar address to the audience, encouraging us to identify with what we're witnessing. It's assumed that the characters and audience share the same values and social status, so that when one couple tells us they're expecting a child, we're supposed to greet this news as if we're socialising with friends, rather than watching a play.

The set design intensifies this complicity. Gorgeously designed and lit by John Comiskey, it fills the entire centre of the Project space, with the audience watching from both sides. This immediacy means that there's no space between audience and performance: part of everyone's experience of the play involves witnessing not only the action, but also the reactions of other audience members. So Rough Magic have produced the play in a manner that encourages the Dublin audience to act communally, giving us work that's not just for us, but explicitly *about* us.

This is in interesting contrast to *Tilsonburg*, Malachy McKenna's promising first play, which also features excellent ensemble acting. A revival of a 2000 Focus production, the play is a good choice as the newly formed Irish Touring Company's first outing – it's designed to travel well. The problem for many touring productions is that the expense of transportation, and the need to be able to adapt to different stages, means that we often end up with sets that are cheap, shabby and bare. *Tilsonburg* sidesteps this problem by setting its action in a place that actually *is* cheap, shabby and bare: a rundown timber cabin, with rudimentary furniture and décor, all designed and constructed by Robert Lane. So the play is well suited to the practicalities of touring. But it has, more importantly, been written without any impediments to its being appreciated by audiences throughout the country. Instead of any localising references of the kind used in the Dublin production of *Shiver*, we have the neutral setting of *Tilsonburg*, Ontario for the action, which focuses on two students – Digger (played by McKenna, who gives himself most of the play's best lines) and Mac (Charlie Bonner) – who have come from Ireland to spend their summer holidays picking tobacco.

On their first night at the tobacco farm, its owner, Jon (Brent Hearne) asks about his new workers' country: "Ireland," he says, "That's part of England, isn't it?" Digger responds to this with consternation, declaring that "Ireland is part of *nothing*" – before doing a double take to consider the negative connotations of this statement. And this is one of the play's key moments, setting out clearly McKenna's thematic concern: he is considering the issues of identity, nationality, and masculinity – and suggests that when the bluster associated with national pride and male bravado is stripped away, what we're quite often left with is, as Digger states, nothing.

This theme is explored by a focus on two sets of relationships, which both revolve around the status afforded by money. Digger and Mac are on a working holiday; for them, manual labour is part of a youthful rite of passage, framed by the knowledge that they'll return to Ireland to resume their university education. This security is contrasted with the vulnerability of the Canadian with whom they share their hut – Billy (Paul Roe), a drug-addict whose work on the farm doesn't just give him a livelihood, but also his only chance of dignity. McKenna handles the contrast between these circumstances interestingly. Less well handled is the relationship between Jon and a mysterious Indian called Pete (Liam Heffernan, who also directs). Pete has seduced Jon's wife, and now threatens to take Jon's farm from him – and in the relationship between the two men, there is a blurring of the distinction between sexual prowess and financial power that is never fully resolved.

Shiver deals with similar issues. Marion is encouraged to identify herself with the company for which she works, being given share options that make the profitability of her employer a matter of personal gain to her. Hughes shows the damage this causes: being betrayed by that company is not just a financial loss for Marion, but a personal

one too. Similarly, Richard and Jenny's attempt to set up their website is a way for them to gain the social status that will allow them to avoid coping with the fact that Jenny is an alcoholic. Like *Tilsonburg*, *Shiver* critically evaluates the doctrine that's informed Ireland's recent past: that you are what you earn.

Another important feature of both plays is their representation of Ireland's place in the world. In *Tilsonburg*, Pete the Indian draws parallels between the Irish students' journey to Canada to make money, and the European adventurers who, centuries before, stole his people's land and resources – an interesting take on Ireland's changing relationship with colonialism. And there's nothing post-colonial about the characters in *Shiver*. After his bankruptcy, Richard is uncomfortable to be left standing in the hallway of a former colleague's house with a maid. He has just blown over \$500,000, apparently without any sense of shame – but, sharing a space with a woman who's travelled from Mexico or the Philippines to make a living, he *does* feel degraded. Hughes' juxtaposition of these characters and McKenna's portrayal of Pete seem to suggest that Ireland is a first world country that has lost its third world memory.

Where both plays falter is with plot, with the action in both cases building up to a second act revelation that doesn't really work. *Shiver* is enacted at remarkable speed, with one scene beginning before another has fully concluded. By piling on the action in this way, Lynne Parker seems to be aiming for a sense of the nervous tension of recent Irish life. This is an interesting decision, but it made it difficult to be shocked by the play's conclusion – to use the clichés, we're being slapped in the face at the end of a roller coaster ride, and it's just too much to take in.

Tilsonburg also suffered from uneven pacing. It's a funny play, with some good one-liners and visual jokes, but its humour overshadows the play's darker elements – so that when Digger and Mac tearfully reveal the ordeal they suffered during their previous summer together, the power of their discussion is lost in the audience's expectation that another gag is just around the corner.

Even without these difficulties, audiences' knowledge of plot is too sophisticated for them to miss the signals that must justify these revelations. So when in *Shiver* one of the characters rediscovers religion – without any real justification – it's obvious that we're being set up for a final scene funeral, just as in *Tilsonburg* Digger and Mac's problems are only ever going to be resolved by revelations of sexual violence. This leads to the reduction of serious issues – religion and sexual assault – to rather obvious plot devices.

Hughes shows that his characters' thoughtless faith in money is as destructive as was the blind faith in religion of earlier Irish generations. McKenna shows that masculinity is not "in crisis", but that for many men, masculinity *is* the crisis, causing them to behave in destructive ways. In making these points, both writers show themselves to be strong on character, theme and dialogue – but instead of putting faith in these skills, they use final scene revelations to sell points that the audiences will already have bought, thereby undermining many of their achievements.

But if this plotting doesn't work – and it didn't for me – Hughes and McKenna are at least trying to do something that many of their contemporaries have shied away from.

McKenna has produced an extraordinarily confident debut, giving us a play that succeeds on many levels, and Hughes' work is maturing interestingly: with *Shiver* he has given us a portrait of our times that's complex, truthful and often provocative. *Tilsonburg* and *Shiver* don't rescue Irish writing from the doldrums, but their originality must be applauded, as must the conviction with which the Focus/ITC and Rough Magic have produced them.

