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The Blind Fiddler

By Marie Jones

Lyric Theatre, Belfast, 10 June – 5 July, 2003

Reviewed 10 June 2003

By Patrick Lonergan

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Perhaps unfairly, Marie Jones remains more noted for commercial rather than critical success. *The Blind Fiddler* – an exciting fusion of melodrama, traditional music, and great storytelling – looks likely to be as successful as her earlier plays. But it also has an impressive emotional and thematic complexity that shows clearly that her work deserves closer critical attention.

The play begins on Lough Derg, a place that's already inspired one of the great works of recent Irish writing – Heaney's "Station Island". Like Heaney, Jones uses the island's three-day pilgrimage to frame an attempt to come to terms with the past. In this case, the pilgrim is Kathleen (Carol Moore), who has come to Lough Derg in the footsteps of Pat, her recently dead father, who had visited the island for each of the previous thirty years.

As a child, Kathleen had been inspired by her father's story of the Blind Fiddler, whose music had so delighted people that it made them forget their hunger. It's a romantic tale – but one that Mary, Kathleen's mother, knew was utterly inappropriate to the life of a poor Catholic family in 1960s Belfast, causing her to insist that Kathleen and her brother reject their father's romanticism for an upbringing that gave them financial security and social acceptance – but at great personal cost. Kathleen is resentful and confused about this – particularly at her father's compliance with this insistence on upward mobility. Her visit to Lough Derg is therefore an attempt to come to terms with her past, which she reconstructs in a series of vignettes set mainly in her father's pub. Populated by a multitude of characters – played by only four actors – each scene is also accompanied by a lively traditional score performed onstage by Cathal Hayden, Máirtín O'Connor, and Cathal Synnott.

At the play's heart is the notion of sacrifice. The people who walk barefoot through Lough Derg do so to be able to better enjoy the lives they'll resume after their pilgrimage. This is poignantly contrasted with the sacrifices made by Pat and Mary for the sake of their children – well motivated, but resulting only in unhappiness. This focus on Catholic ideas about sacrifice allows Jones to provide one of the most interesting treatments of sectarianism yet seen on an Irish stage. Although ostensibly acting in her children's interests, Mary is motivated by terrible shame about her own status, insisting that her children speak in accents different to her own, that her husband cease playing the fiddle, and refusing to allow a traditional wake to be held in their pub. What's tragic is that these sacrifices prove partially justified – Mary's children acquire financial stability, whereas their father's clientele are forced to emigrate because of Belfast businesses' refusal to employ Catholics.

Jones manages to deal with these issues without being divisive, presenting the action *around* the Troubles, in the early 1960s and the present. This allows her to show how social class and sectarianism are closely related in Northern Ireland – an idea that's

clearly relevant to the Troubles, while also resonating with other aspects of Irish life: the association of traditional Irish culture with shame and poverty has been a powerful influence on life here since the Famine, remaining evident in many ways even now. Jones is therefore attempting to reclaim our traditions from our history: she shows that traditional Irish music has been an undervalued – and devalued – tradition, and her inclusion of music in the play, as well as the musicians' movement during the action from the stage's wings to its centre, are powerful gestures.

There is also a theatrical reclamation at work: with a brief nod to Synge, Jones is clearly reaching back to Boucicault. This is one of the play's most likeable aspects, but also one of its problems. The use of music and dance is likely to bring the play much success, but their importance is sometimes overplayed, so that – as was the case with *Dancing at Lughnasa* (which *The Blind Fiddler* in some ways resembles) – the production may be misinterpreted as offering the message that oppression isn't so bad once the people being oppressed can sing a nice tune and dance with 'wild' abandon. Jones's writing works against this interpretation, but there are times – particularly during the final ten minutes – when the sentimentality becomes excessive. But this problem shouldn't detract from the quality of Jones's achievement: ensuring that her audience will go home happy, she still refuses them any easy answers to the problems she poses.

The play has been given a fantastic production by the Lyric. The set, designed by Ferdia Murphy, moves with impressive flexibility through a variety of locations, and Paul Keogan's lighting is great. But the cast, directed Ian McElhinney, are the heroes here. Moore gives a fine performance in the play's central role, and she is brilliantly supported by Julia Deardon, John Hewitt, Dan Gordon and Frankie McCafferty, who all play multiple roles. Whether *The Blind Fiddler* will prove as successful as Jones's earlier work, it's certainly her most rewarding play to date.

