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The Gigli Concert

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Peter Sullivan and Eileen Walsh in Druid's 'The Gigli Concert'. Photo: Keith Pattison



Peter Sullivan in Druid's 'The Gigli Concert'. Photo: Keith Pattison



Denis Conway in Druid's 'The Gigli Concert'. Photo: Keith Pattison

by **Patrick Lonergan** Reviewed 20 July

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One of the clichés of Irish theatre historiography is that drama in this country is excessively verbal – that our dramatists write for the voice, but not for the body. But if you actually go to the theatre here, it soon becomes obvious that the distinction between text and movement is a false one. Many of our great actors are great precisely because of their ability to embody the text: their movement is always based on their breathing as they deliver lines, and their decisions about where, when and how to move always seem to begin with their lungs. I'd think in this context of how Owen Roe often uses hand gestures to convey the force of his dialogue, or of how Aidan Kelly uses the build-up and release of tension around his shoulders to create a sense of menace in his delivery of lines. I'd think too of Aisling O'Sullivan's ability to convey hesitation or ridicule with a tilt of her head before speaking, or of how Dearbhle Crotty establishes her characters' relationships with others by subtly leaning towards or away from them in conversation. Actors are supposed to move, of course – but my point here is that the best actors make the distinction between the voice and the body seem nonsensical.

Eileen Walsh would need to be included in such a list of performers, of course. She has a remarkable ability to use simple objects in a way that adds depth to our understanding of her characters – think of the cigarette lighter that she struggled with at the end of the Doyle/Adigun *Playboy of the Western World* in 2007, or the towel she used to cover her face during Jimmy Fay's production of *Saved* earlier that year. That skill is particularly evident in this Druid production of *The Gigli Concert* too. [Please note that in the current touring production, November-December 2009, the role of Mona is performed by Dearbhle Crotty.]

Murphy's play is regarded in Ireland as a masterpiece, but critics have been less willing to praise it when it's been produced abroad. One of the criticisms consistently levelled against it is that Mona, the play's only female character, is underwritten – that she is a symbol or a cipher, that she exists only to explain key features of the personality of the play's English protagonist JPW King.

Walsh's performance won't entirely refute the suggestion that Murphy could have made more of Mona. But her presentation of the character is complex, and often very moving. For much of the play, Walsh seems stiff, her arms and legs held rigidly – so her decisions about when and how to relax reveal her character's vulnerability, not to mention her feelings about JPW. Similarly, her tone initially seems monotonous. Lines are delivered in a somewhat higher pitch than we'd expect from Walsh, and most sentences end with a slightly interrogative tilt further upwards, and are concluded with a smile that often transforms gently into a grimace. So just as Walsh's body moves from defensiveness to intimacy, her voice moves from hopeless monotone to hopeful questioning. The consistency of this approach to movement and speech discreetly reminds the audience that Mona desperately wants to be loved by JPW – but that she also knows that he is incapable of giving her what she needs.

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Denis Conway's performance as the Irishman is similarly effective. As always, he has a tendency to use the movement of his arms – with his hands extended like shovels – as a way of marking his territory on the stage. Thus, we can sense the transformation of his character's state of mind by observing the amount of space he occupies from one scene to the next. When he first arrives in JPW's office, he's shrouded by a long coat and hat; his hesitation is conveyed by the shortness of his steps around the room, and his vulnerability is evident in his slightly bowed stance. By the end of the play, he has loosened up: we find him sprawled across a chair, a dashing white scarf around his shoulders, a cigar perched easily between his fingers. We know that the latter pose is a false one: that it's only a matter of time before this property developer's bubble bursts, and he is again overtaken by depression.

One scene in particular emphasises the quality of Conway's acting. In the fourth scene of the play, he acts out Gigli's biography, pretending that the tenor's life-story is his own. We soon realise that Conway's speech and movement are perfectly in time with the music that's also playing on stage (Toselli's *Serenade*). His arm loops outward as he describes a moment of happiness, and simultaneously the voice of the tenor swoops upwards joyfully – and the song and the story conclude at exactly the same moment. This effect is called for in the script, but Conway's timing and technique emphasise that his character's desire to sing like Gigli arises from a need to perform – to be what he is not, to escape himself and the world he inhabits. I can think of no better illustration of how Tom Murphy's writing is so grounded in melody, rhythm, and sound.

As JPW King, Peter Sullivan must tackle what is by far the most difficult scene in the play: its conclusion, when his character must sing like Gigli. In world drama, only *The Winter's Tale* has such an ending: it seems miraculous on the page, but is almost impossible to pull off on stage. The audience, after all, must literally believe that King is singing, but in most productions it looks instead as if he is miming to music that is being blasted over a PA system. Sullivan deals with this problem by contorting his body as the music begins to play: one senses that the song is being pulled from his guts into the auditorium, almost against his will. This sense that the audience is "required to awake our faith" in the supernatural is further emphasised by Davy Cunningham's lighting, which throws King's body in enormous silhouette against the back of the set, so that it seems as though the character has been possessed by something demonic. I remain unsure of whether audience members who don't know the play will fully understand the significance of what's happening in this scene. But I also can't imagine a better solution to the problem posed by Murphy than that offered by Sullivan – until, that is, we find an actor who actually can sing like Gigli.

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I also very much admired Sullivan's decision to underplay one of the other key moments in the play, when Mona leaves King, having told him that she has cancer. As she leaves, the script calls for King to shout after her "I love you" and "fuck you" repeatedly, in recognition of the fact that she has gone and won't be coming back. Sullivan instead mutters these words, almost gulping them down, his arms folded desperately around his chest. I thought initially that more could have been made of the scene, but the play's finale made sense of it: King's singing becomes an outpouring of everything that has

been suppressed up to that point.

There are many ways to praise this production of *The Gigli Concert*. It's a marvellous way to christen Druid's refurbished theatre – which Hynes emphasised by having windows fling themselves open at the performance's conclusion, flooding the theatre with light (an effect that recalls Selina Cartmell's similarly liberatory approach to the Gate Theatre when she directed *Festen* there in 2006). It's also an important corrective to some of the more extravagant claims that were made about the 'relevance' of Murphy's new play *The Last Days of a Reluctant Tyrant*, which concluded its run at the Abbey the month before Gigli opened. This production shows that Murphy's work is as relevant to the 1980s as it is to 2009 – not because he thinks like a journalist whose aim is to comment on the present, but because, as an artist, he creates work that resonates across different periods. But the most remarkable feature of the production is the quality of the acting, which blends into an astonishing harmony the skills of all concerned.

Patrick Lonergan lectures at NUI Galway. He is currently working on a research project about the performance of Shakespeare in Dublin since the seventeenth century.

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The Gigli Concert by Tom Murphy

14 - 25 July, 2009

Produced by [Druid Theatre](#)

In [Druid Theatre](#)

Directed by Garry Hynes

Design: Francis O'Connor

Lighting design: Davy Cunningham

Sound design: John Leonard

With: Denis Conway, Peter Sullivan, Eileen Walsh.

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