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The Field

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Brian Dennehy as The Bull McCabe in 'The Field'. Photo: Anthony Woods
Irish attitudes towards John B. Keane have changed a lot during the last ten years – due largely to Garry Hynes’ production of four of his plays during that period. Keane has always been popular, but he was also seen by many as populist: as someone who chose sentimentality over pathos, the grotesque over the tragic, and cheap laughs over careful characterisation. Hynes’ productions gave us a darker and more dignified Keane: his plays might be flawed, she showed – but they certainly shouldn’t be dismissed. Nine years after his death, Keane is still seen as a popular playwright – but he’s also regarded as someone who needs to be taken more seriously now.

This Joe Dowling production of Keane’s 1965 play *The Field* blends both attitudes well. It treats Keane’s work with seriousness and presents it with integrity – but it also has a good-humoured lightness of touch that makes the play reassuringly accessible.

That blended approach is made evident in the play’s first moments, when a shimmering painted backdrop of the field is whisked away to reveal the interior of the pub where most of the action takes place. As we register the careful details of Frank Hallinan Flood’s set, the pub’s facade is lowered onto the stage. We gaze at the scene for less than a minute, as if standing in the street, looking through the bar’s windows, imagining that we too can stroll through its doors. The façade sways silently, before disappearing again – and then the action begins.

What’s being displayed by this use of the set is the production’s sincerity of intention. The striking but fleeting image

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Garrett Lombard as Tadhg, Brian Dennehy as The Bull in ‘The Field’. Photo: Anthony Woods

by Patrick Lonergan

Reviewed 17 January

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communicates to the audience that the play has been heavily invested in, and has been (and should be) taken seriously. But if this image highlights the show’s resources, it doesn’t significantly deepen our understanding of the action: it impresses us, but doesn’t make us think.

The set’s emphasis on realism also prepares us for the directorial approach, which seems to view the play with a sense of historical detachment. For instance, an undeniable feature of many of Keane’s dramas is the casual misogyny of the male characters, as shown in this play when the returned Irishman William Dee (Stephen Hogan) says that he wants to buy the field because his wife is suffering “from her nerves” – an expression that will be seen as laughably old-fashioned by most audiences today. Ben Barnes’s productions of Keane in the 1990s tended to ironise such statements; Hynes’ more recent versions suppressed or problematised them. But here the presentation seems neutral. We aren’t invited to share the characters’ attitudes, or to laugh at them, but simply to observe them – from the distance of almost fifty years.

That neutrality of attitude extends to other features of the production, notably its treatment of religion. The Field’s relevance to our own times is certainly obvious – and it’s actually refreshing that Dowling doesn’t feel the need to telegraph its resonances to the audience. But there are times when his production seems a little too detached from the present: it’s certainly not a museum piece, but it lacks immediacy.

What it has instead is a very strong focus on the audience. We don’t get the wink and nudge style of playing that often mars productions of Keane’s plays, but we are constantly invited to take pleasure in the actors’ work as performance. As a result, many of the lines are delivered directly to the audience rather than the other actors – most incongruously so during the play’s auction scene, when the two bidders sit with their backs turned to the auctioneer, but facing the audience.

That outwardly-directed style of performance is often considered necessary at the Olympia and Gaiety, due to their size. But I felt that the production was trying too hard to get the audience on its side, building up our good will but not our sense of tension. That approach became most problematic in the final scene, when the opening-night audience interrupted the action to cheer Derbhle Crotty (as Mamie Flanagan) and Brendan Conroy (as the Bird) off stage after both delivered their final speeches. There’s no doubt that both actors deserved the applause, but the break in the audience’s concentration significantly reduced the impact of the play’s last speech, by Brian Dennehy as the Bull McCabe. This meant that we left the theatre happy, but not really moved. This style of playing also means that Dennehy’s performance seems relatively muted – not because he does anything wrong, but simply because his is one of the few characters on stage that can’t be played straight out to the audience. So the balance isn’t quite right yet.

This is regrettable, because for the most part the acting is commendably restrained and well-judged. Crotty’s portrait of the changing (and deepening) personality of her character is skilfully done: her frustration and isolation remain constant but are re-imagined carefully from one scene to the next. Also impressive is the pairing of Dennehy with Garret Lombard as the Bull’s son, Tadhg. Dennehy knows that the Bull exercises power not only through threats but also through silence. He is a fidgeting, volatile presence, who seems almost too large for the pub: only when he’s in the open air – in his field – does his tension disappear. That contrast between tension and harmony in Dennehy’s performance makes the Bull seem both intimidating and strangely vulnerable.

Similarly, Lombard gives a characteristically detailed and intelligent performance, persuading us that he is both an individual and his father’s son. He mirrors some of Dennehy’s gestures and his gait, but also makes clear the son’s inferiority to (but love for) his father. There’s one truly gorgeous scene between Dennehy and Lombard at the start of the play’s second half, when the pair share a quiet moment together in the field, gazing at a passing airplane that confuses the father but excites the son. As played by the pair, this scene tells us everything we need to know about these characters’ past, present, and futures.

Ultimately, then, the pleasure of this production lies in its performances. Almost all of the actors are very careful, providing some lovely details here and there – the occasional drift into an English accent by Stephen Hogan, the affectionate but slightly unhinged quality of Brid Ní Neachtain’s laughter in response to John Olohan’s clowning, a reassuring pat on the arm by Malcolm Adams as the town priest, and so on. With Hynes’ versions of Keane still fresh in my memory, I personally found this production a little old-fashioned, a little too willing to take the play at face value. But it’s
The Field by John B. Keane

17 Jan - 17 Feb, 2011 (on tour)

Produced by Lane Productions
In the Olympia Theatre

Directed by Joe Dowling

Set design: Frank Hallinan Flood
Lighting design: Malcolm Rippeth
Costume design: Joan Bergin
Sound design: Ivan Birthistle and Vincent Doherty

With: Malcolm Adams, Alan Archbold, Brendan Conroy, Derbhle Crotty, Brian Dennehy, Gavin Fulham, Bosco Hogan, Stephen Hogan, Eamon Hunt, Gareth Lombard, Bernadette McKenna, Brid Ni Neachtain, John Olohan

Tour dates: 17 January – 13 February at the Olympia Theatre, Dublin; 15-17 February at the INEC, Killarney; 24-26 February at the Royal Theatre, Castlebar.

Video

The Field - Staring Brian Denneh...

Irish Theatre Magazine

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