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HURL
By Charlie O'Neill
Barrabas theatre company
Black Box Theatre Galway,
14-17 July 2003

Reviewed 14 July 2003 by Patrick Lonergan

Minutes into *Hurl*, Charlie O'Neill's play about a multi-ethnic hurling team, a ripple of discomfort sweeps through the audience. On stage, a man and woman have entered the house of an alcoholic ex-priest; understandably, the place looks like a pigsty. "Irish men!" declares the woman, with gentle disdain. The line generates laughter, but there's also audible disapproval, as if something inappropriate has been said. This is because the speaker is black, and from abroad. And some audience members clearly take offence at her character's delivery of a line that would have passed without comment if uttered by a white Irish woman.

This is a great example of *Hurl's* strength. An exploration of how "an Ireland of difference has made a different Ireland", it plays skilfully with Irish audiences' highly confused attitudes to ethnic and racial differences, showing that prejudice is rarely as straightforward as we might think. Premiered in July 2003 at the Galway Arts Festival, where it played to mixed reviews, it was re-worked for a Dublin Theatre Festival production in October. I attended the Galway production, but have also been able to watch a video, and read the updated script, for the Dublin performance – and want here to discuss both.

According to the 2002 census, over 10% of the Irish population was born abroad – an increase of 150,000 people since 1996. Many Irish theatre companies have tackled the issue of "difference" that arises from this demographic development, but most attempts to do so have been atrociously bad. Multi-ethnicity is always presented as a problem to be solved, and characterisations of people from other cultures constantly rework the same two clichés. There's the (usually black) boyfriend who is brought home for dinner, to prove to a conservative father-figure (or the audience?) that he is really "just like us". And there's the outsider as victim – usually an asylum seeker whose deportation should make "us" hang our heads in shame. Such approaches do not promote respect for difference, but instead ask an audience presupposed to be white to sympathise with an abject black other. Ethnicity is simplified as being about race, and an "us and them" mentality is strongly reinforced. In short, many Irish plays that present themselves as anti-racist end up working as examples of how deep-seated Irish racism actually is.

Hurl brings some much-needed sophistication to this genre, showing that Ireland's new demography cannot be treated simplistically by presenting characters notable for their variety, rather than their deviation from Irish notions of "normality". Some members of the hurling team at the centre of the play are asylum seekers, others are refugees, others are Irish-born children of immigrants, and we meet characters from Africa, eastern Europe and Latin America – and Ireland too. So *Hurl* makes clear that no single narrative can encompass the experiences of immigrants in our society. This complexity is illustrated in one particularly effective scene, in which two Bosnian schoolfriends meet by chance in a Dublin lapdancing club – the man as a customer,

and the woman as a dancer. Their awkwardness together exposes one of the fundamental truths about Irish immigration: Ireland is for many a refuge from war and poverty, but it has disgracefully exploited many immigrants, paying them poorly to do jobs that Irish-born people won't take. *Hurl* makes both points clearly, and deserves praise for doing so.

The mode of performance, directed in the best Barrabas style by Raymond Keane, emphasises versatility. The playing area is empty, with only a goalpost at the rear of the stage – so the actors use boxes to create sets, as required. The cast switch easily through characters and accents, men playing women, black and Asian actors playing white characters – enacting the idea that identity doesn't have to be fixed. And the style of narrative shifts from storytelling to the use of miniature sets, tableaux, puppetry, and dance. We are shown that there are many ways of presenting the same story – which supports the play's theme very well. And the use of hurling as the vehicle for all of this proves in numerous ways a great choice.

However, we do run into problems with the narrative, a standard “team wins against the odds” affair. This is a plot that offers little room for originality, and the best recent example of it – John Breen's *Alone it Stands* – worked because it told its audience the match's result before the action began. But here the narrative is presented as if the outcome might be in doubt, making lines like “no-one could have guessed what was going to happen next” play like authorial wishful thinking. *Hurl* might have been more effective if it tackled its inevitable predictability more directly, perhaps by announcing straightway that the story is about how the Freetown Slashers won the Provincial Cup.

But a more serious problem is in the play's presentation of many Irish characters. Sophisticated characterisation isn't needed for this kind of drama, so it's not a problem that we have a melodramatic villain, and a team-coach whose gruff exterior belies a heart of gold. But there is confusion here between narrative type – which is acceptable – and social stereotype, which is not. We have a character from Fatima Mansions, who is (of course) inarticulate and prone to violence. We have the standard jokes about the Christian Brothers' “skill” with sticks. In the Galway production, the audience is asked to laugh at the pretentiousness of Dublin TV presenters; in the Dublin production, the presenters are from rural Ireland and therefore are inept. Many rural characters are described as “ignorant” and “muck savage”, and the play's villain, Rusty Cox, is your standard culchie as caveman, with red hair peaking out under tweed cap in what can only be called the Irish version of blackface. So this quickly becomes another Irish play in which the terms “rural” and “backward” are presented as synonymous.

Barrabas didn't invent this stereotype, and they're not the worst offenders in its use – but this feature of Irish discourse does actually affect the way that real people in our society are treated. No-one will think that Rusty is an accurate representation of Irish manhood – but the play should be trying to move away from these kinds of clichés. So although the effect of this characterisation is that the audience will relate most to the play's non-Irish characters – powerfully undermining Irish attitudes towards otherness – we are still stuck in an “us against them” dynamic. And that allows audiences to dismiss Irish racism as existing only in the so-called “arsehole of rural

Ireland”, and not in the country’s businesses, government and media. Or, for that matter, in themselves.

The development of the play from Galway to Dublin retains the production’s strengths, but cannot overcome this inherent difficulty. But that development is nevertheless praiseworthy. We change from a sometimes indisciplined and unfocussed two-act play to a tighter ninety-minute one-acter. A lot of sentimentality is jettisoned, and much of the plot streamlined and clarified. Characterisation is generally stronger, as is the flow of the action. Acting and movement remain first-rate, and the play’s warmth is maintained. It’s great to see Barrabas’s willingness to tackle some of the criticisms that greeted the play in Galway, and the play is much stronger as a result.

The end product is often wonderful to watch, performed by a cast whose conviction and enjoyment quickly become infectious. The play has its problems, but it also has a lot of fun bringing things to the Irish stage too rarely seen in the past. And it has the courage to point out that asylum seekers in Ireland are given only 19 euro a week, to audiences who have spent 20 euro per ticket to see a play that is in large part about those asylum seekers. So *Hurl* knows that it is, ultimately, an act of ventriloquism, speaking on behalf of people who have no voice in Irish culture – including our theatre. I left the play with a strong sense that what’s needed now is for Ireland’s recent immigrants to be supported in speaking for themselves, and to each other. By making that case, *Hurl* is a very important step in the right direction. But we – and I use the word intentionally – still have a long way to go.