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Only an Apple by Tom MacIntyre

Peacock Theatre

With Malcolm Adams, Fiona Bell, Cathy Belton, Steve Blount, Tina Kellegher, Michael McElhatton, Mary Rea, Don Wycherley

Directed by Selina Cartmell

Set Design by Dick Bird

Lighting Design by Matthew Richardson

Costumes by Niamh Lunny

Composer: Conor Linehan.

Choreographer: Ella Clarke.

21 April – 30 May

Reviewed 6 May by Patrick Lonergan

You have to wonder why Irish dramatists keep writing plays about politicians. In 1969, Brian Friel's *The Mundy Scheme* brilliantly satirised the political life of that period, while anticipating much that would follow. Yet that play is never revived, has been out of print for years, and is rarely written about. In 2001, Sebastian Barry premiered *Hinterland*, another grossly underrated drama about a fictitious Taoiseach, who in this case resembled Charles Haughey. Barry's play was accused of being 'moronic' in the press; he later said that the critical response in Ireland was like something out of Stalin's Russia. Marina Carr's 2002 *Ariel* had as its protagonist a midlands politician who sells his soul for political power. That work was greeted not with hostility, but with indifference and snide contempt – and Carr has not written a play set in the midlands since.

One of the reasons that such plays have been poorly received is that our politicians are so mediocre as to defy dramatisation. When Irish playwrights present such figures in tragic mode, their work seems overblown and pretentious. Yet to write about them in a comical way seems facile: politicians do a perfectly good job at making themselves seem ridiculous, after all. Nevertheless, Irish dramatists continue to write about politicians – and continue to face problems when they do so.

As is so often the case in Irish theatre, Tom MacIntyre is an exception to this rule. In his 1995 play *Good Evening Mr Collins*, he showed an ability to sidestep the risks inherent in presenting political figures – in that case, Michael Collins and Eamon De Valera. He did so by making clear that he wasn't attempting to present a convincing biographical portrait of anyone, but was instead exploring how Ireland's understanding of his two characters has developed through time. His play was deliberately fantastical, often self-contradictory, and overwhelmingly confused – just like the collective Irish memory of Collins and Dev themselves.

MacIntyre repeats this trick successfully with *Only an Apple*, a play that is – yet at the same time most definitely is not – about Charles Haughey.

As the lights come up, Don Wycherley – only called 'Taoiseach' during the play – appears centre stage, standing in an impressively regal pose, in an impressively regal drawing room. This set, designed by Dick Bird, matches perfectly the play's tone, being full of pretty objects that are revealed to be hollow when we look beneath their surfaces. There is a packed bookcase and a gorgeous old globe that suggest their owner is very learned – but the real function of both is to hide a generous stash of booze. There are impressive portraits on the walls, showing the Taoiseach skiing, golfing, and on

horseback – achieving physical rather than intellectual excellence, and acting in pursuit of pleasure rather than power. At the end of the play, Wycherly himself strips away his clothes, showing that beneath his expensively clad exterior, he is little more than a clown, mooning at the audience like a disgraced toddler. The play seems constantly to recall *The School for Scandal*, that other Irish satire of a society obsessed with surface appearances – as may be indicated by MacIntyre’s decision to name the Taoiseach’s trusty servant ‘Sheridan’ (played by Malcolm Adams, who is hilarious but in danger of being typecast in the role of comic subordinate).

The play succeeds mainly because the action is mediated through the consciousness of the Taoiseach – we see the world not as it is, but as it appears to him. He is being haunted by Grace O’Malley and Queen Elizabeth (Cathy Belton and Fiona Bell respectively), two succubi whose characterisation is used to reveal the Taoiseach’s attitude towards women in general. *Only an Apple* quickly becomes a domination fantasy in which virgin and whore come together to fuck with the play’s male characters (that crude expression, with all its connotations, is really the only way to describe it). So we get to enjoy Belton and Bell’s torment of the Taoiseach’s press secretary (McElhatton), his stereotypically gay national poet (Rea), and his political rival (Blount, in a performance that was received by the audience as a cheap send-up of Brian Cowen, though it’s not clear if it was intended as such).

The visual imagery employed by Selina Cartmell recalls the tone and aesthetic of pre-Revolutionary France – a surprising but effective choice that complements MacIntyre’s style without overwhelming it. By broadening the frame of reference, Cartmell universalises the play’s treatment of political power, shifting our attention away from the parochial – away, that is, from Haughey and our own sorry state. As always with Cartmell, one constantly senses that the action could spill at any moment from the stage and into the auditorium. It remains baffling that she is not directing work on the Abbey’s main-stage.

Only an Apple, then, is vacuous, crude, and infantile. It is consistently sexist and occasionally homophobic. It is incoherent and self-regarding. And because it is all of those things, it is a stunningly appropriate and stimulating portrait of our political system – one that allows us to imagine what the world looks like from the perspective of a mediocre man with serious responsibilities. So many recent Abbey plays have suffered from trying too hard to be topical; *Only an Apple* is relevant and absorbing precisely because it chooses to leave itself open to interpretation, trusting audiences to relate what they are seeing to their own lives, and their own situations.

Patrick Lonergan teaches drama at NUI Galway. His book *Theatre and Globalization* won the 2008 Theatre Book Prize.