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The New Electric Ballroom, written and directed by Enda Walsh  
Druid Theatre, Galway  
With Rosaleen Linehan, Val Lilley, Mikel Murfi, and Catherine Walsh.  
Designer: Sabine Dargent  
Lighting: Sinead McKenna  
14-26 July 2008  
Reviewed 14 July by Patrick Lonergan

I recently spent a few weeks reading through Irish play reviews from the 1950s and 60s – not everyone’s idea of a good time, perhaps, but interesting in its own way. One of the things that most impressed me about the theatre critics of that period was their response to the early work of Beckett. They were frank in admitting that they didn’t understand everything that Beckett was doing, but they consistently expressed a profound respect for his originality, the beauty of his language, and the integrity of his worldview. There was also a growing sense of excitement as each new play premiered: each one was judged not just in its own right, but as part of a developing body of work – so that, for instance, *Happy Days* could be used as a way of understanding *Godot* better, even as it prepared audiences for the next play.

Like many Irish writers, Enda Walsh is often compared to Beckett – but for superficial reasons, like his use of language or monologue. Yet, reading those old reviews, I became aware of how deeply the affinity between the two writers runs.

Walsh’s plays, like Beckett’s, are difficult but rewarding: repeated viewing and re-reading is not just beneficial but essential. Both bodies of work are intensely literary, built on a dizzying array of allusions and extended metaphors. With both writers, audiences need time to understand what’s happening, which means (among other things) that it’s almost impossible to write an overnight review of either writer’s works without doing them a disservice. Finally, Walsh is not so much writing a series of plays as developing a body of work, with each new drama helping us to understand everything he has written before.

Walsh doesn’t have the international reach and significance of Beckett – not yet, anyway. But while plenty of Irish writers can riff happily on well-worn Beckettian themes, Walsh actually tries to meet the technical, formal, and thematic challenges set by the elder writer. This makes him one of the very few dramatists in Irish theatre who can set the critical terms against which his work must be judged.

So it comes as no surprise that *The New Electric Ballroom* revisits themes that dominate Walsh’s plays. Again, we encounter people who tell stories obsessively, perhaps from a fear that their silence will lead inevitably to catastrophe. And, again, those characters imagine themselves as actors in outrageous stories that contrast precisely with their real lives: the livelier the story, the more mundane the existence of the story’s teller.

Where *Ballroom* differs from Walsh’s other works is in its exploration of the themes of watching and being watched – especially as those themes relate to gender. The action takes place in the home of three sisters, Ada, Breda, and Clara (played by Walsh, Linehan, and Lilley respectively) where, like the demented director in Beckett’s *Catastrophe*, Ada forces her sisters to repeatedly narrate and perform a story about tragic events that occurred shortly before her own birth. The two elder women are thus forced to imagine themselves as others see them: there are recurrent references to clothing, make-up, photographs, and other visual images – all of which are used to frame (and thus to limit) the pair.

These performances are interrupted occasionally by a fishmonger called Patsy (Murfi), who arrives with the turning of each tide to bring local gossip and, well, lots of fish. The play's pivotal moment arises when Breda and Clare, acting like the biblical double act of Martha and Mary, decide to break this routine: they strip Patsy down to his underwear and wash him, freeing him from his own cycle of repetition and allowing him (like Christ) to accept his father's legacy, if only briefly. As in Walsh's last play *The Walworth Farce*, the characters must then face a choice between a frighteningly unfamiliar freedom and the deadening but safe *status quo*. Interestingly, however, that choice is first imagined in terms of the bodies of women, only to be enacted through the body of a man.

As we'd expect, Walsh's direction allows the play's rhythm to emerge clearly: he uses repetition to underline key ideas and, more importantly, to lull the audience into a false sense of security. This means that we're completely disarmed when the play's finale arrives, bringing us a moment when the spoken word is finally abandoned – replaced first by song, and then by the hauntingly meaningless noise of a boiling kettle. It's a stunning conclusion to a play that adds brilliantly to Walsh's oeuvre.

Patrick Lonergan's most recent books are *The Methuen Drama Anthology of Irish Plays*, *Interactions – the Dublin Theatre Festival 1957-2007* (with Nicholas Grene), and *Theatre and Globalization: Irish Drama in the Celtic Tiger Era*.