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Author(s)	Lonergan, Patrick
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Stained Glass at Samhain,
Town Hall Theatre, Galway

Irish Times, 2 November 2002

As a young nun, Patricia Burke Brogan spent a week at the Magdalene Laundries, an experience that so disturbed her that, 30 years later, she wrote *Eclipsed* – the controversial 1992 play that was one of the first attempts to expose the abuse suffered by Irish women in institutions run by the Catholic Church.

Burke Brogan has subsequently spoken of her discomfort with her audiences' focus on the church's role in this scandal. *Stained Glass at Samhain* therefore takes us back to the Magdalene Laundries, arguing that society as a whole must take responsibility for that tragedy.

Sister Luke, played beautifully by Geraldine Plunkett, has returned to the Laundries, now being demolished by a property developer. Standing beneath a stained-glass window – which, interestingly, represents both a crucifix and a woman's body – she recalls her life there. Much of her story focuses on Sister Benedict, a novice whose attempts to leave the convent are being frustrated by her Mother Superior and local bishop. We also meet Father James, a young chaplain, and Maura, a former inmate.

The play's strength is the complexity of its moral response to clerical abuse. We respect Sister Benedict's decision to leave the church, but understand Sister Luke's desire to remain in it. Similarly, we deplore the greed of the bishop, but also feel contempt for the property developers, who callously exhume the bodies of the Magdalene dead, concreting over their graves to build multi-storey carparks.

Unfortunately, the play's morality is occasionally obscured by structural incoherency. With 21 scenes in 80 minutes, the play cannot find a rhythm – lighting and sound could have been better used to signal shifts in focus and chronology. Furthermore, given the author's obvious desire to avoid scapegoating, the portrayal of the bishop and Mother Superior are far too close to caricature.

Nevertheless, such problems only become evident when a play is performed, and the Town Hall deserves praise for this production. There is certainly enough here to suggest that this compassionate, courageous play should be developed further, and brought to a wider audience.

