



MONDAY, OCTOBER 14, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: "Dublin Carol" Hits a Mournful But Hopeful Note

DUBLIN CAROL ** 1/2 out of ****

IRISH REPERTORY THEATRE

The new spoof *Forbidden Broadway: The Next Generation* has fun teasing the recent Broadway drama *The Ferryman*. That show brimmed over with children and drinking and the Troubles, so *Forbidden Broadway* sings the question: "What is the state of Irish drama?" The answer? "Grim, grim, grim."

Well, the Irish Rep tackles what might be playwright Conor McPherson's idea of a holiday show. You'll find loads of drinking and troubles (if not THE Troubles) and the tone is indeed grim, along with some black humor. But given its setting on Christmas Eve, at least *Dublin Carol* has the grace to avoid crushing your spirit completely. It features a small, wavering candle flame of hope at the very end. I'll take it.

Still, it's no surprise the holiday setting has not fooled Irish Rep into delivering this play during the actual holidays. *Dublin Carol* ends its run before Thanksgiving and the Irish Rep offers the enjoyable nonsense of a *London Assurance* revival through the New Year. This is the sixth play by McPherson revived by the company (including their exceptional production of *The Weir*). Here's hoping they keep working their way through his body of work. Maybe a double bill of the one acts *This Lime Tree Bower* and *Come On Over* is next? And is it too soon to bring back *The Night Alive*? McPherson and the Irish Rep are lucky to have one another.

Still, this is my first time seeing it and I'm not quite sure what I think of the play. Or, rather, I'm not sure if it's the play or the production that doesn't quite satisfy.



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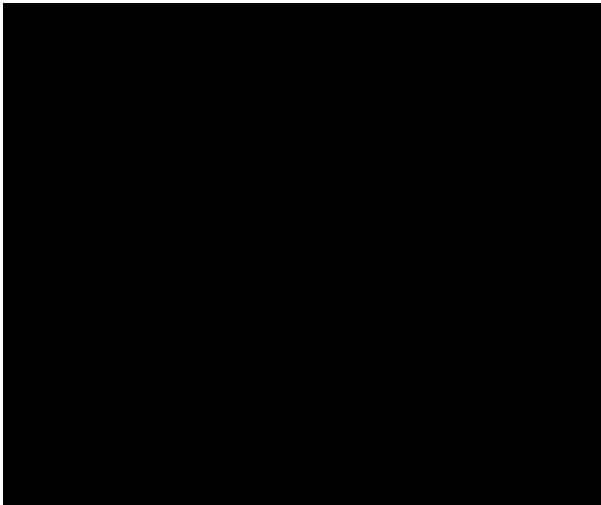
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▼ 2019 (81)
▶ November (1)
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The story is a familiar one, somehow. John Plunkett is a sad wreck of a man, an alcoholic whose eyes are always darting towards a bottle...or studiously trying *not* to look at a bottle calling to him. He's the senior man in charge of a funeral parlor while the owner is slowly dying in hospital. It's Christmas Eve, 1999, and John is teaching the new lad Mark the ropes. They've just finished working a job and Mark perks up a bit when John insists he was grand, proved a natural at what was apparently Mark's first assignment. Sitting in a tatty, tired office decorated with a few modest holiday decorations, Mark sits with John for a few minutes and then makes to go.

John leaps to his feet, offering a cookie, another drink, another task -- anything to keep the lad from leaving him alone. John's story pours out of him: a marriage ruined by drink, a son who is too much like his dad, a daughter he hasn't seen in years. You've heard it all before. Mark should be off duty but he is dragooned into doing the same job he did at the funeral: sitting around looking politely mournful while other people vent their emotions or struggle not to let go.

In the next scene, John's daughter Mary shows up with painful news. John's wife is also in hospital and dying. Mary urges him to visit today, assuming he can stay somewhat sober. He can't quite believe his presence is welcome, but Mary says it is. Soon they're trading painful tales. Mary describes John's dreadful behavior and then John tops her with even more self-flagellation. In the show's best moment, John insists he can't say he's sorry because that's such a pathetic request given the damage he's done...and then he drops to his knees and begs for it anyway.

In the third and final scene, Mark returns for his pay but John is too distraught and too drunk to have bothered with a trip to the bank. He clings to the lad but is soon alone with his thoughts and memories. Alone on Christmas Eve, with his daughter soon to return, John wrestles with the bottle and his desire to maybe take one small step towards redemption. Maybe, for just a minute, he can play a carol on

"Find Me"

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THEATER: "Terra Firma" Is On
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- September (10)
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the radio, put out some poor excuse for a gift (probably grabbed at the local chemists) and not screw things up. Maybe.

While the elements may be familiar, there's no reason on God's green earth that *Dublin Carol* couldn't be so specific it came to life. Or it might surprise in some way, such as *The Seafarer*, where the Devil manages to shake up another familiar tale. But *Dublin Carol* does not offer an unexpected surprise or the shiver of familiarity, the moment where you think, "I know this person." Instead you think, "I know this play." Still, the tech elements are spot-on and it's directed ably if without fire by Ciarán O'Reilly.

The cast is fine. Sarah Street has the most detailed and vigorous character in Mary, a woman who isn't there to condemn *or* hold hands. Cillian Hegarty's Mark is harder to pin down. I've no idea what kind of person Mark might be. But it's notable that Mark spends much of the play listening and Hegarty felt alive and present with nothing more to rely on than his own stage presence. I look forward to seeing his next role. Jeffrey Bean has by far the biggest part as John, which means he either lets the play down a tad or reveals its limitations. Still, he's not bad (cruel compliment, that), just...unsurprising.

That's the same complaint I've made throughout and it holds. Like a new holiday song hoping for airplay alongside "Jingle Bells" and "Fairytale Of New York," *Dublin Carol* must compete with the other strong plays by McPherson, not to mention every drama ever made to justify its existence. In this production, it strikes a note too similar to distinguish it from so many other shows that have come before.

THEATER OF 2019

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[Mrs. Murray's Menagerie](#) *** 1/2

[Oklahoma! \(on Broadway\)](#) ** 1/2

[Socrates](#) **

[The Pain Of My Belligerence](#) *

[Burn This](#) **

[Hadestown](#) *** 1/2

[All My Sons](#) * 1/2

[Tootsie](#) ** 1/2

[Ink](#) ***

[Beetlejuice](#) **

[Estado Vegetal](#) ***

► [June](#) (3)

► [May](#) (6)

► [April](#) (10)

► [March](#) (5)

► [February](#) (1)

► [January](#) (8)

► [2018](#) (38)

► [2017](#) (6)

► [2016](#) (2)

► [2015](#) (29)

► [2014](#) (2)

► [2013](#) (5)

► [2012](#) (17)

► [2011](#) (15)

► [2010](#) (10)

► [2009](#) (43)

► [2008](#) (86)

► [2007](#) (781)

► [2006](#) (2412)

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[The Great Society](#) **
[I Can't See](#) *
[Heroes Of The Fourth Turning](#) ** 1/2
[Chasing Rainbows: The Road To Oz](#) ***
[The Glass Menagerie](#) (dir Austin Pendleton & Peter Bloch) **
[Terra Firma](#) (debut of The Coop theater company) **
[Forbidden Broadway: The Next Generation](#)
[Dublin Carol](#) ** 1/2
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