



Theater: Double Shot Of Enda Walsh



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ROOMS ** out of ****

IRISH ARTS CENTER

ARLINGTON *** out of ****

ST. ANN'S WAREHOUSE

Playwright Enda Walsh burst into our consciousness with the out-there antics of *The Walworth Farce*. That was a messy, sprawling alive work of theater, however nutty its plot may have been. Ever since, one gets the feeling Walsh has instinctively pulled away from anything too human and bloody and real in his work, much preferring the arid unreality of something like Cillian Murphy in *Misterman* or the sincere but inert Bowie musical *Lazarus*. But that's a decidedly unfair conclusion to draw, since Walsh has done so much work we simply haven't seen in New York. And it is profoundly contradicted by the biggest success of Walsh's career: his collaboration on the warm, lovely musical *Once*.

So let's play a little catch-up on Walsh's body of work with two new shows. *Rooms* is more of an installation than a show and *Arlington* is a proper play. Both reinforce the wariness I imagine to run through Walsh's work. But *Arlington* is so well acted and presented (with Walsh directing) that it engages you emotionally almost against its better judgement.

In *Rooms*, we are broken up into groups of about six people and escorted into small spaces one at a time — three rooms which you experience in no particular order. One room is a shabby motel room, another a long narrow kitchen and the third the room of a little girl. In each, we hear a pre-recorded monologue of a person inhabiting that room and telling their story. In two rooms, the modest lighting slowly dims; in the third it gets brighter. And that's it, with the whole thing over in about an hour.

Attendants brightly sweep you into a room by saying, "Anyone for the kitchen?" and so on. You are encouraged repeatedly to explore the room in the minute or so before the monologue begins. (Design is by Paul Fahy and Scenic Artist is Ger Sweeney.) Given the high level of detail reached by *Sleep No More* and other immersive events, I dove in eagerly. Yet while the sets were perfectly fine in capturing the shabby

anonymity of a hotel room from afar, for example, there was literally nothing of note in any drawers or anywhere else. Why encourage people to explore a kitchen when most cabinet doors were glued shut? (In the fridge, all we learned was that someone in the home is lactose intolerant and they're out of Lactaid.) The little girl's room felt similarly unrevealing.

Each monologue charted a drab life with a modest twist towards the end that I won't spoil. They were ably performed but the overall effect was a lot of bother for very little effect. One might have easily presented them as podcasts; while that wouldn't have improved the modest monologues, it would have allowed them to take shape without the burden of traveling to a location to hear them or while looking at sets that did not reward scrutiny. Similarly, the sound design (except for one brief touch in the hotel room monologue, I think) also seemed thoroughly conventional. Given the set up, one expected a lot more to be learned or at least hinted at by the scenic design and more dash in the sound design. I often think Walsh searches for one note to strike and sticks with it in a piece; that's certainly the case with this show.

Happily, *Arlington* is a big improvement and hopefully a sign of things to come. It's an enigmatic, dystopian tale delivered with visual panache, an excellent sound design and three performances that breathe life into its mysterious story. If Walsh hadn't shied away (again) from the compelling plot he put into motion, it might have achieved greatness. Still, we should celebrate the most successful solo work of Walsh since *The Walworth Farce*.

It begins in a room, a rather spare room with a half-filled aquarium in the back, some anonymous waiting

room-style chairs and a tall window. We can see another tiny room far to the side on stage right, separated by a wall and crammed full of monitors and the like. A woman is in the main room and she seems trapped, somehow. Eventually, a mousy little man appears in the little control room and he begins to talk to her over a speaker system while observing the woman on monitors. It's his first day, we think, and he's quite nervous and though she is clearly the one imprisoned in some way, in their conversation it's the woman who seems a lot more certain about how things should go.

Slowly, a dreadful story emerges. We're in some dystopian future world and this woman's stories or dreams or visions are awfully important to somebody, somewhere. Society has collapsed in some fundamental way and the elites have responded by building huge towers in which the masses are housed. Of course, what really matters is not the world taking place outside these rooms but the real connection being forged by these two. In what is clearly an expected task, he encourages the woman to recount stories from her life and — weirdly — he sometimes plays musical accompaniment. They spark each other, dancing around the awful reality of what's really going on while gingerly figuring out who this other person might be and how much to trust them.

It's an odd and compelling story. In the middle of it, we get another actress performing a dance piece that encapsulates the maddening existence of being trapped in this lab of stories and then a final twist with a new resident of the main room that won't be much of a surprise to anyone who has read a fair amount of sci-fi.

Hugh O'Connor plays the young man and Charlie Murphy plays the young woman and they are compelling performers. (Oona Doherty delivers the frenzied and effective dance piece in the middle.) While it's fun to piece together what the heck is actually going on in this alternate reality, the real story is the connection these two make. Murphy is amusingly brusque even as she's constantly reminded of how little power she wields. O'Connor is disarmingly humane even as we wonder exactly how complicit he is in the new order. Their scene crafting a story together is especially haunting.

Walsh sets up a marvelous dynamic. But the story we want — the story of these two people learning to trust each other and the expected moment when the young man might decide to enter the main room or perhaps let her out...or decide against it — mostly takes place in between the scenes we see. Walsh gives enough story for the actors to put flesh and blood on this nightmarish scenario, but it might have been much more.

On the other hand, Walsh is clearly in control of what he wanted to present (as opposed to what I hoped for). All the technical elements — score, design, lighting, sound and video — are top-notch and reach some dizzying heights. Murphy has complete command of the stage and moves with authority, even when asked to contort herself via the excellent choreography of Emma Martin. O'Connor (who delivered one of the great child actor performances in *My Left Foot*) brings an essential decency to the young man that gives this work its beating pulse. If only Walsh hadn't looked away when the most human moments occurred.

Theater Of 2017

The Fever (The Public's UTR Festival) **

Lula del Ray (The Public's UTR Festival) **

La Mélancolie des Dragons (The Public's UTR Festival at the Kitchen) **

Top Secret International (State 1) (The Public's UTR Festival at Brooklyn Museum) **

The Present **

The Liar *** 1/2

Jitney *** 1/2

The Tempest (Harriet Walter at St. Ann's) *** 1/2

Significant Other * 1/2

The Skin Of Our Teeth ***

Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 (w Groban) ** (third visit, but *** if you haven't seen it)

Everybody (at Signature) ** 1/2

Idomeneo (at Met w Levine conducting) *** 1/2

Sunday In The Park With George (w Jake Gyllenhaal) ****

The Light Years * 1/12

The Glass Menagerie (w Sally Field, Joe Mantello) *** 1/2

946: The Amazing Story Of Adolphus Tips **

The Price (w Mark Ruffalo) *

Come From Away *

Miss Saigon **

Picnic/Come Back Little Sheba * 1/2

Broadway By The Year: The 1940s **

Vanity Fair (at Pearl) ***

Latin History For Morons * 1/2

On The Grounds Of Belonging (workshop production w Bobby Steggert)

Wakey Wakey ***

Present Laughter (w Kevin Kline) ***

CasablancaBox ** 1/2

Amélie * 1/2

The Play That Goes Wrong **

Indecent ** 1/2

The Hairy Animal (covered briefly in “Mourning Becomes Electra” review) ***

The Antipodes **

Anastasia **

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory **

Oslo *** 1/2

The Little Foxes **

Groundhog Day ** 1/2

Babes In Toyland (Kelli O’Hara at Carnegie Hall) ** 1/2

Mourning Becomes Electra **

A Doll’s House, Part 2 *** 1/2

Bandstand ** 1/2

Pacific Overtures (at CSC) ***

Six Degrees Of Separation (w Allison Janney) **

Twelfth Night (Public Theater Mobile Unit) ** 1/2

Rooms **

Arlington ***

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