

Wednesday, September 16, 2009

[Review- A Short Wake \(1st Irish\)](#)

The Fab Marquee review by *Diánna Martin*.

Family dysfunction comes in all shapes and sizes, from all cultures. However, something can be definitely be said for the type of relationships that are cultivated in an Irish-American household that includes drinking and physical abuse. Siblings can either stick together to keep secrets or escape to other sides of the country - or the world - as they struggle to get away from their past (and each other)... although we all know that our pasts never leave us, they just have a way of sticking to us, like gum on the bottom of our shoes; or, in some cases, can be re-routed into positive outlets such as the arts.



A Short Wake, by Derek Murphy, a Dubliner, brings us into the funeral parlor for the wake of the father of Teddy (Peter Bradbury) and Jimmy (Brandon Williams). The main centerpiece of the set is a huge casket and a few chairs - perfect, really. Held in New York, the wake is a rather pitiful affair - both sons make note of the lack of anyone coming to mourn the man in the coffin and the flower arrangements looking a bit tired. Murphy's continuous hilarious dialogue allows Bradbury, even alone, to flourish as the two-bit con in a nice suit (and greasy hair), following in his bookie father's footsteps, having moments between cracking jokes to quiet his own sadness and unease as well as conflicting feelings of the final weeks of the father's cancer as he stood by his bedside. Conflicted because dear ol' dad actually thought it was the younger brother, Jimmy, the whole time, holding his hand -

Jimmy, who has not been around in ten years and hates his father with a fiery passion.

As Bradbury sips from his flask and clutches his stomach from acid reflux, we see Williams finally enter, reluctantly, into the parlour. A successful lawyer in California - as far away from New York as he can get without leaving the country - Jimmy emanates a powerful wave of tension from the moment he enters the room. He can't even get past the first few chairs in the parlour, and it's Bradbury who is making all the effort to try to get a hug and pull him into the room - to try to find a common ground and a way to get past their years of dealing with abusive parents and be brothers again.

But it's not so easy. Jimmy can't understand why Teddy is even in mourning for the man that he considers to be a horrible father, human being, and abusive alcoholic; and Teddy can't understand why Jimmy can't let it go now that the man is dead - and why his younger brother's selective memory seems to have forgotten some important points about what their mother was really like as well; her alcoholism, her abusive behavior, and what really went on during one particular night that changed all of their lives forever.

And so we have a brilliantly written and acted two-character play that is really a four-character play; because the man in the coffin and the woman that we learn more about as the play goes on become as important as the two brothers on stage who, as they sip their whiskey and gin, begin to open up to each other more and more. Is this about a couple of drunk Irishmen going over old times? NO. This is a play about family, about how memories can be completely different depending on who is telling the story, and how 30-year-old grudges can become mantras for no reason other than they exist.

Bradbury had me from the beginning. From his New York bookie attitude combined with his actual pain about his father - and the hilarious monologue he has before Williams comes on, I was delightfully absorbed. When Williams first entered, and for the first fifteen minutes after his entrance, I thought the actor had some tics and was holding onto his prep to the point where it was interfering with his relating to his brother, and his ability to take in this brother he hadn't seen in 10 years (even though we know our siblings and sometimes have to only glance at them even after that long). His anger was so consuming that it almost became a fifth character in the room. But as they began to talk more, and as he accepted his brother's gift of fine whiskey in a flask, I began to see some of the

prep drop, and just see a character who was in tremendous emotional pain dealing with his smart-ass brother, and vice-versa; and once he got cooking with Bradbury, then the show took off, I felt, for him and for me. Both actors should be applauded for holding this critic in the palm of their hand, simply following along as the two wove tales tall and true about their lives and loves and their relationship with each other - and the pain they were trying to get past.

Combine truly gifted actors, with fantastic direction from Ludovica Villar-Hauser and this amazing rich, darkly comedic dialogue, and you are left afterwards simply wanting to see it again. I thought the staging was great (I never saw the director's hand, and so it goes in a well-directed piece); however, one thing I would have tried was to not open the casket so that we saw the figure inside. To open it upstage would have been better, I think; for although the acting was so good that it kept my mind off of what was in that coffin, I still kept having to block it out, especially when I had a view, it took me out of the play momentarily.

It's my understanding that many, if not all, of the 21 plays in this festival are of high caliber; however, if you see any of them, please add *A Short Wake* to your list. Anyone who has ever had difficulty talking to a family member, and anyone who has ever wondered what it was like (are there families like that out there?) will be taken on an emotional roller-coaster, with laughter filling in the spots where it sometimes hits too close to the bone.

1st Irish 2009 and Tweiss Productions present

A Short Wake

Sept 10-26, 2009

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