

ACTF Response to U of M-Flint's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*

I was first intrigued to come and see University of Michigan-Flint's production of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* because of my fondness for the work of Martin McDonagh, and the fascinating reviews that I had read about previous productions of the play. I knew that the play was a dark comedy that contained extremely graphic violence, scenes of torture, and some kind of classic McDonagh twist at the end. What I did not know, until my arrival, was that U of M-Flint's production of this work of immense violence and gore would be performed in a tiny, intimate black box space.

My first reaction upon entering the theatre was one of surprise and curiosity. The space was extremely tiny, housing only 2 ½ rows of seats in an L-formation. I wondered how an extreme level of violence would be accomplished in such a sparse space, and what impact it would have on the audience at such close range. I was also taken in by the interesting stage picture: a man was asleep on a tattered couch, a sandwich on a plate in his lap, fully dressed, in what appeared to be his shabby living room. The two walls behind him mirrored the L-shape of the space, and appeared to be made out of terra cotta type concrete. There was a window in each wall, through which shafts of light gently spilled on the windowsills. Each of the walls was flanked by a square pillar, and the space between the walls and the pillars evoked the idea of entryways. Also in the space were a small chest or ottoman, and a television resting on a stand, which would become a central theme in the production. This stage picture, although sparse, immediately provided a sense of this man's character and identity- a slovenly bachelor of low economic status without much to live for. It immediately welcomed the audience out of their own world and into the world of the play. I was unfortunately jolted out of this image when a young

girl in army garb climbed through the window and moved the television set. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to this, and I wondered if there had been a mistake in the preset of the television, and if her entrance onstage was a way of correcting this.

Some of my questions about the violence were answered before the play began in the pre-show announcement and program explanation that the violence would be "stylized". There would be no actual gunfire, but rather extremely loud sound effects coupled with a strobe effect would be employed to give the impact of the gunshots. We were warned that these effects would be unnervingly loud and harsh and to prepare ourselves for this when we saw a gun pointed onstage. From a safety point of view I appreciated this disclaimer, pointing guns towards an audience, particularly in such a small space can arouse great feelings of unease and danger. As a member of the Society of American Fight Directors with some training in gun safety, I was glad to know that the guns were purely prop guns and would not actually be fired. However, from an audience stand point this disclaimer caused me to plug my ears and squint my eyes when the guns went off, which took me out of those moments of the show. I respect the choice to shock and rivet the audience, but I also found myself unable to see and hear what was going on immediately before, during and after the gunshots, which detracted from my connection to the play.

The first moment of the play was highly effective. The television was turned around to face the audience, and images of military violence and footage of the IRA were played on the television accompanied by upbeat Irish music. This immediately set the tone for the rest of the play- the juxtaposition of horrific, unsettling violence with

something campy, upbeat, and almost fun. It also served to introduce one of the central images and themes of the production: mediated violence.

Later in the play the images from the television were transferred to the neutral colored walls at the back of the set, and later on to a curtain drawn across the stage. The projected images kept the play thematically connected to the notion of the media and the televised image, and allowed the space to expand beyond the seeming limitations of a tiny black box theatre. The use of projections in the play was one of the most effective elements of the production.

The projections were one ingredient in the overall design concept which functioned flexibly and economically to give the audience a clear sense of time, place and mood. With nothing more than the 2 walls and pillars, a single curtain, and a handful of scenic pieces, the setting moved from living room, to torture cell, to country roadside.

This effective story-telling was accomplished collaboratively through the use of projections, simple scenic pieces that could be carried on and off, subtle ambient sound effects, and effective lighting. The lighting designer's creation of shadows, particularly in the torture scene, was particularly haunting. However, as previously mentioned, the use of the strobe light to accompany the gunshots was a heavy-handed choice and personally took me out of the play.

The costumes were effective at establishing the socioeconomic status and personality of each of the characters. The drab military uniforms of the members of the INLA contrasted effectively with the more colorful clothing of the townspeople. Mairead's parachute pants and combat boots combined with the cross around her neck immediately gave us a sense of this character and her internal contradictions. My one

wardrobe quip was with Donny's costume: He was neatly dressed in slacks, a button-down shirt, belt and shoes, clothing that seemed a bit too classy for Donny's character. Also, throughout the play he never changed his clothes, or even took off his shoes, belt, or outer shirt, even when he was going to sleep. I did not find this believable, and it took me out of the world of the play. The properties were effective, even within a play with strange property demands. From the pink bicycle to the bevy of live cats onstage, the props supported the play and helped to tell the story.

The transitions between the scenes were smooth, tight and interesting to watch. They were truly one of the strengths of the production. Actors stayed in character as they changed the set and the moves were highly choreographed, effectively utilizing symmetry, rhythm and pace to keep the audience engaged between the scenes. The musical choices further enhanced the cohesiveness of the transitions.

The acting in the show was of mixed level. I applaud the choice to give greener actors opportunities like this, but it was clear that much of the talent was quite raw. The dialect was a difficult challenge to overcome in this production. At the top of the show the dialect was very difficult to understand- the actors seemed to be rushing through it. Some actors were more successful than others with the dialect. In the torture scene when the character of James was hanging upside down, he slipped several times back into his American dialect. As the play continued on, the dialect became more consistent and easier to understand. This was probably a double function of the actors relaxing and the audience's ear tuning in to the unique vocal qualities. The physical work was also at mixed levels. The character of Donny, in particular, did not seem connected to his body.

The words that were used to describe his character, and the words that he used to express himself, did not match his body language.

The actor playing Davey demonstrated a consistent commitment to his circumstances and a sense of the stakes throughout the play, and the actor playing Padraig had some very connected moments. I wanted to see a greater commitment and higher sense of stakes from the rest of the cast. I believe that the challenge of this play is balancing the juxtaposition of comedy with extremely heightened, dangerous and disturbing circumstances. The night that I saw the production the cast was very successful at evoking laughter from the audience, but was less successful at playing the seriousness of the stakes of the play. I wanted to see a stronger point of view from each of the actors about their circumstances. The torture scene, in particular, set the tone for the rest of the play, by first inviting the audience to laugh at violence. The character of James needed to truly fight for his life, and he didn't quite get there. I believe that Martin McDonagh truly wanted us to laugh, but also wanted us to be uncomfortable with what were laughing at. Perhaps if the actors invested more in the seriousness of their circumstances, this second layer of the play could have been accessed. I wanted to see greater investment from the actors in the extraordinarily serious circumstances of this play.

Some of the weak links in the acting were dexterously balanced by a strong directorial hand. The stage pictures throughout the play were powerful and dramatic, reflecting the relationships and action of each scene. Levels were used wonderfully, and there were several moments of fascinating physical work including the torture prisoner hanging upside down from the hook, and Padraig's attempt to escape from the two INLA soldiers. The choice to stage this play in such an intimate space was a bold one, which

wins my immense respect. And finally the coaching and directing of young actors in such an ambitious work merits applause.

Towards the end of the play, the script calls for the hacking up of dead bodies, which was staged behind the couch. While I understand the utilitarian aspect of this choice, watching the heads bob up and down behind the couch as they chopped up invisible bodies became somewhat ludicrous. Again, it fed in to the inherent comedy of the scene, but at the cost of the believability and true ugliness of the scene.

The strong sense of ensemble amongst the cast and crew was palpable and significant, both onstage and in the response session. There is an immensely valuable feeling of victory that comes with tackling a project against, and in spite of, the odds. The mounting of this particular play in such an intimate space, with minimal production support and an artistically young student team was an enormous undertaking that warrants respect. It was clear from speaking with the students following the show that they had tasted victory with this production, and that is worth its weight in gold.