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Dublin Theatre Festival 2015: infuriatingly enjoyable 'The Night Alive'

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The Night Alive by Conor McPherson

Rating: ★★★★★

No good deed goes unpunished for tarnished Samaritan Tommy, who offers shelter to a wounded woman, Aimee, in his one room, hoarder's hovel he calls home. He likes to take in strays in the room he rents from his Uncle Maurice. Like his work associate, the sometimes homeless and childlike Doc. It makes Tommy's own sense of failure pale in comparison, being the one eyed king in a junkyard kingdom of the blind. It also helps hide his innate selfishness from himself as he appears to do the decent thing. Until decency asks him to step up and he asks at what cost? In [Conor McPherson's](#) latest play, the darkly comic "The Night Alive" the damned and desperate huddle together for protection from the darkness outside and in. But sanctuary can disappear in an instant when the dark strikes like a vampire in the night.

Speaking of the playwriting process McPherson claims, "neatness, causality and even clarity can

be fatal enemies.” In “The Night Alive” McPherson adheres to this belief with conviction. But it’s not all left to chance. Structurally “The Night Alive” feels like a game of two halves, with a period of extra time tagged on at the end. The first and most enjoyable half is dominated by the comic as its rag tag band of Dublin misfits try establish connections. Dysfunction looms large. Tommy, a wheeler dealer on the run from a broken marriage is shirking responsibility for his daughter, who is manifesting worrying behaviour. Doc, a harmless soul with a disability which can restrict him from absorbing anything new for up to twelve seconds, sleeps on the camp bed in Tommy’s room under which he hides vegetables stolen from Uncle Maurice’s garden. Widower Maurice struggles with memories and regrets along with the shenanigans of Tommy and Doc. The dynamic here has shades of classic British comedies, feeling at times as if Del Boy, Rodney and Grandad had taken up residence in Steptoe and Sons junkyard. Into this chaos enters Aimee, a hooker with a smashed up face, compliments of her vicious boyfriend Kenneth. Gradually, through the sharing of gifts, practical arrangements and a late night family supper, a sort of harmony develops, culminating in a brief, beautiful moment of togetherness inspired by Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Going On?”

The comic gives way to the dark as we sharply enter the second half with the unannounced entrance of Kenneth, a mean, menacing psychopath who preys on the weak. He wants Aimee and has no qualms about hurting people, a fact they now have to contend with. So strong is the contrast here it almost feels as if someone had changed the channel to an entirely different programme. But in extra time the comic and the dark blend as it’s all brought home, even if a spiritual element introduced infuriatingly late in the day throws heaven into uncertainty.

If clarity is renounced in the writing, it's very much present in the direction. But there’s no conflict here for in directing the “The Night Alive” McPherson creates the conditions where the nuances of his rich and detailed script and the immense talents of his stellar cast appear to manifest naturally and a clarity ensues as a result. With outstanding performances from Adrian Dunbar as Tommy, Laurence Kinlan as Doc, Frank Grimes as Uncle Maurice and Ian-Lloyd Anderson as Kenneth, the males of this almost all male ensemble round out their characters perfectly. In contrast, Kate Stanley Brennan as the sphinx like Aimee, a damsel in distress in a male universe hurt by the men who love her, is less rounded, feeling more like a catalyst than a character. But Kate Stanley Brennan does a remarkable job by doing so much despite having so little to work with.

It’s a rare event to premiere a new Conor McPherson production in Ireland. There have already been a number of international productions of the “The Night Alive,” indeed it won The New York Drama Critics Circle Award 2013 – 2014 for Best Play. But this is an entirely new production directed by McPherson himself in a co-production by Dublin Theatre Festival and The Lyric Theatre, Belfast. It’s not always neat, and it won’t advance the cause of strong roles for woman on stage. But "The Night Alive" is honest, meaty, fun, sometimes touching, with some great dialogue, astute direction and brilliant performances.

“The Night Alive” by Conor McPherson, co-produced by Dublin Theatre Festival and Lyric Theatre, Belfast runs at The Gaiety Theatre as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival before transferring to the Lyric Theatre, Belfast.

For further information on dates, times and tickets visit [Dublin Theatre Festival](#) or [Lyric Theatre, Belfast](#)



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