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Nothing too derogatory with "The Plough and the Stars"

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*Ros Kavanagh*

The Plough and the Stars by Sean O'Casey,

Rating: ★★★★★

The birth of a nation is a complex, messy and bloody affair, steeped in laughter, curses and tears. All of which are given ample expression in [The Abbey Theatre](#)'s brave new production of Sean O'Casey's classic 'The Plough and the Stars,' running as part of The Abbey's Waking the Nation season. Here the singing of 'Amhrán na bhFiann' invariably goes hand in hand with real or potential bloodshed. Whether it's a consumptive Mollser, a wounded soldier or an innocent woman, Ireland's 'The Soldier's Song' leaves behind it a bloody trail of broken hearts, bodies and minds. As an emerging Ireland and its national anthem are baptised in blood, women and children bear the brunt of the suffering. And through it all the community laugh, curse, sing and survive. Hilariously funny, yet dark and disturbing, this thought provoking production focuses on the humanity behind the fight for Irish independence. A flawed, engaging and vibrant humanity brought to life in this wonderfully engaging and vibrant production.

While steeped in the events of 1916 director Sean Holmes ensures 'The Plough and the Stars' crafts something sharply contemporary in this edgy take on O'Casey's 1926 classic. With more than a passing nod to Brecht's Epic Theatre, the whole has the feel of a dislocated Dublin adrift between its past and present, of a community whose high ideals struggle with the poverty of their everyday lives. A community of builders, bowsies and high rise tenements, protesters, publicans and world weary prostitutes. A place where soldiers fight and people die amidst karaoke, impassioned speeches and a little opportunistic looting, all in the name of freedom.

With characters who wouldn't look out of place in an episode of 'Love/Hate,' director Sean Holmes ensures 'The Plough and the Stars' has lost none of its power to provoke, still asking big, relevant questions for today. Heavy on laughter, it has the audience eating out of its hand for the most part. But if it plays it for laughs a little too obviously during the first three acts, a price is paid in its finding it hard to successfully transition into darker places, particularly during the final act. But if not everything, or everyone, works well all of the time, 'The Plough and The Stars' is more than the whole of its constituent parts. Its sharp, brave pulse keeps beating the entire two and a half hours during which engagement rarely wanes.

An excellent set design by Jon Bausor eschews the literal in favour of the suggestive using scaffolding to terrific effect. Paul Keogan's pulsating lighting design, replete with a studded Plough constellation adorning the back wall, is perfectly complimented by Philip Stewart's pumping sound design, both of which heighten 'The Plough and the Stars' contemporary feel. As does Catherine Fay's excellent costume designs which wonderfully marry the past and present whilst subtly accentuating character.

While performances were strong throughout, some were notably stronger. Nyree Yergainharsian as Rosie Redmond and Ger Kelly as the bar tender played it straight to David Ganly's Fluther Good, Ciarán O'Brien's The Young Covey and Jack Hayes' Uncle Peter, all of whom were enjoyable as 'The Plough and the Stars' comic relief. Ian-Lloyd Anderson as Jack Clitheroe and Kate Stanley Brennan as his loving wife Nora were both excellent and left you wishing O'Casey had given us more of these star crossed lovers. Janet Moran was a delight as the gossiping, noseyparker Mrs Gogan, mother to the sickly Mollser played by Mahnoor Saad making her Abbey debut. A stunning performance by Eileen Walsh as the acerbic Bessie Burgess, the heartless drunk with a hidden heart of gold, was utterly riveting with Walsh being a sheer joy to behold.

If it seems a safe bet that 'The Plough and the Stars' would get rolled out as part of our 1916 commemorative programme, this production doesn't play it safe, nor does it deal in cheap, sentimental patriotism. Rather it is both a remembrance and a questioning, a re-evaluation of both then and now. Neither fully a recreation nor a reimagining, 'The Plough and the Stars,' is something entirely familiar yet utterly new unto itself. Edgy, epic and wildly energetic, 'The Plough and the Stars' is an utterly enjoyable production and one not to be missed.

The Plough and The Stars by Sean O'Casey runs at The Abbey Theatre until April 23rd.

For further information on times, tickets and tour dates visit [The Abbey Theatre](#)



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