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'Town Is Dead' is a dark Dublin delight

June 10, 2016

10:26 PM MST

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Barbara Brennan as Ellen in Town Is Dead
Ros Kavanagh

Town Is Dead written and directed by Philip McMahon with music by Raymond Scannell

Rating: ★★★★★

It's a case of out with the new and in with the old in "Town Is Dead," written and directed by Philip McMahon, with music by Raymond Scannell. Old secrets, old lovers, old times and old family scores all come home to roost in this thoughtful and hugely entertaining production, premiering as part of The [Abbey Theatre's](#) "Waking The Nation" programme for 2016. Even the new is old. Contemporary themes such as interracial relationships, immigration, national identity, drug abuse and an old Dublin in decline are all part of an old story we've heard told many times before. But if this is Dublin of the rare aul times, its tenements are all 21st century Dublin.

At its core, "Town Is Dead" is a play about women as much as it's a play about Dublin. Three women to be precise. Taking place over the course of a single afternoon in Ellen's rundown flat on

Dominic Street, Ellen is found packing her belongings, being compelled to move in with her suburban, snobbish sister in Lucan, as her former Georgian home is to be sold to make way for an office block. Ellen's none too happy about it, and lets her son and confidant, Will, know in no uncertain terms. Nor is the heavily pregnant, Croatian refugee, and Ellen's upstairs neighbour Katarina, who inserts herself into Ellen's life with Ellen's begrudging but secret approval. But if Ellen didn't already have enough on her plate, the unexpected arrival of Rachel from Birmingham tips everything over. Long forgotten secrets emerge and past meets present in the face of an uncertain future for all three women.

Described as a play within music, it might be more accurate to call "Town Is Dead" an anti-musical, and to thank it all the more for being so. Yes, there's songs of a sort, oodles of charm and even a little dance routine. But gone is the musical's often saccharine, schmaltzy sentimentality, replaced with some real sentiment, some grit and grime and some searing honesty. Philip Scannell's clever score works with the musical rhythms of speech, particularly Dublin speech, to incredible effect. While "Town Is Dead" claims it can function without music, this would be a poor play indeed were that to be the case. Live musicians Danny Forde on keyboards, Christiane O'Mahony on harp and Conor Shiels on clarinets offer a beautifully realised marriage of music and text when called upon to do so. Paul O' Mahony's set design carefully incorporates, whilst cleverly concealing, the live musicians, and Sarah Jane Shiels evocative lighting design almost functions as another musical instrument in itself. If dramatically low on stakes, with exposition often dominating over drama, Philip McMahon's otherwise excellent script thematically shows a maturity and depth which its surface simplicity often belies. There's more than a hint of O'Casey about "Town Is Dead," with McMahon's modern day Dubliners offering many laughs, uncomfortable insights and rich, interpretive possibilities.

Conall Keating does a convincing job as Ellen's son Will, in a role with little dramatic function other than as the male linking two of the women's lives. Fia Houston-Hamilton as the searching Rachel also does extremely well, including negotiating a large chunk of exposition after her initial entrance which laboured itself a bit, slowing things down considerably. Barbara Brennan as the Dublin dame, Ellen, dominates the stage in one of her most powerful and compelling performance. But if experience shows its strength, youth too shows its considerable promise in the form of Kate Gilmore as the loud mouth, pregnant Katarina. Gilmore is an absolute delight, being utterly engaged and engaging from start to finish, despite her character's obvious dramatic limitations.

As the light declines on a forgotten Dublin city and its rare old times, something haunting remains in "Town Is Dead" as the walls and streets peopled with invisible, living ghosts tell their stories. Funny, powerful, poignant, "Town Is Dead" is one of the highlights of The Abbey's "Waking The Nation" programme to date. A haunting dirge to Dublin, "Town Is Dead" is heartfelt and dark, yet tremendously good fun.

"Town Is Dead" written and directed by Philip McMahon, with music by Raymond Scannell runs at The Peacock Stage at The Abbey Theatre until July 9th

For information on times and tickets visit [The Abbey Theatre](#)



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