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Dublin Theatre Festival 2015: 'I'm Your Man's' dark night of the soul

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I'm Your Man by THISISPOPBABY

Photo by Fiona Morgan with kind permission from Dublin Theatre Festival

I'm Your Man by THISISPOPBABY

Rating: ★★★★★

Through darkness and shadows of night Matthew wrestles with his grief, madness and melancholia. The only way to channel his pain is through music, which courses through him right down to his fingertips as he conducts the madness into a shape to contain it. In "I'm Your Man" by THISISPOPBABY, music offers the possibility of salvation to a soul trapped in the depths of a personal hell. Ambitious, daring and striving for emotional directness, "I'm Your Man" aims high and often hits the mark, but in relying on well-worn metaphors it loses some of its power.

Described as a collision of music and theatre, at times "I'm Your Man" feels as if the loose narrative, constructed around a sequence of tightly structured songs, is forced to fit in places. Musically and melodically these are good solid songs. Lyrically and imaginatively we're often in the

realm of Saint John of the Cross and Dante's Divine Comedy. Lyrics by Mark Palmer and book by Phillip McMahon are replete with religious metaphors built around a narrative of journeying through the fires of hell to the heaven of love, redemption and resurrection. Employing abstractions such as beast, demons and the monster take us down a familiar path trodden before and trodden better. It's only when it sheds this reliance on well-tried metaphors and shifts to the simple, honest and direct that "I'm Your Man" really achieves the emotional potency it strives for. A breakdown in a shopping mall has much more impact than all the demons that surround it. When Ruth McGill gives her incredible rendition of "Not Going to Hell" which lyrically rises above its title's obvious referencing, its direct, emotional honesty has the hairs rising on the back of your neck.

Where "I'm Your Man" truly excels is in the calibre of its performers. Alma Kelliher, Bronwyn Murphy-White, Bryan O'Connell and Mark Palmer musically and vocally were excellent. Adam Matthews and Ruth McGill were astonishing, hitting at times that moment when the emotion risks spilling out of the song that contains it and taking both to another place. Choreographer Philip Connaughton elicits moments of strong physicality, most notably from Palmer, crafting Palmer's natural grace and fluidity into some visually impressive moments. Phillip McMahon's direction ensures "I'm Your Man" rises above being simply a concert in a black box space into something fresh that honours both the theatrical and musical elements on display.

It might be tempting to think of "I'm Your Man" as an intimate gig by THISISPOPBABY performing a concept album from cover to cover, with some compelling theatrical moments thrown in for good measure. There's even an excellent encore. But to do so would be to miss the obvious. If "I'm Your Man" marks something of a departure for THISISPOPBABY, they're still challenging themselves and their audience to explore new possibilities for both music and theatre. If, like the CD on sale afterwards, which is really only an EP, "I'm Your Man" doesn't deliver everything, it's daring, emotional honesty, strong performances and incredible vocals resonate powerfully in a production that bravely strives for something new.

"I'm Your Man" by THISISPOPBABY runs at The [Project Arts Centre](#) as part of the [Dublin Theatre Festival 2015](#).

For information on dates, times and tickets visit [Dublin Theatre Festival](#) or [Project Arts Centre](#)



Chris O'Rourke
Theatre Examiner

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