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Festival Connect - Opposites attract in The Talk Of The Town

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Catherine Walker as Maeve Brennan in *The Talk Of The Town*
Landmark Productions

The Talk Of The Town

Rating: ★★★★★

New York, 1949. A young, Dublin woman sits alongside three of *The New Yorker* magazine's chosen few. She is confident, if mildly apprehensive, having just been admitted to their illustrious ranks. In the coming decade this Long Winded Lady would marry one, have an affair with another and develop a strong, if conflicted, relationship with the third. She would also realise her ambition of becoming a writer. The woman is Maeve Brennan and in *The Talk Of The Town*, writer [Emma Donoghue](#) attempts to celebrate Brennan both as woman and as artist.

It would be inaccurate to call *The Talk Of The Town* strictly biographical. Focusing as it does on the 1950's when Brennan was at her peak, and excluding Brennan's horrific and tragic decline, it omits so much that is crucial to knowing the historical Brennan. Its treatment of many people in

Brennan's life as cyphers, most notably Brennan's father, Robert Brennan, famous Republican and founder of **The Irish Press** newspaper, suggests that biography was not the intended point. In *The Talk Of The Town*, which deals as much in expressionism as biography, Donoghue's Brennan is a metaphor for the plight of women, the plight of the artist and the plight of woman as artist.

Brennan is a host of contrasts and contradictions. She is Irish in America, a Dubliner in New York, a woman in a man's world, a solitary in a marriage, an extroverted introvert and a writer who cannot seem to write. Echoes of Ireland, both loved and feared, haunt this Bohemian soul who, beneath her confidence, elegance and sophistication, feels like a fraud at times. Crafted words and phrases give her a voice, yet also seem to restrain that voice. When livid, her elegant restraint gives way as Irish turns of phrase burst through like demons, possessing her with something she seems both proud and ashamed of. Everyday is a struggle: to live, to be, to write.

Emma Donoghue's Maeve Brennan is a multi-layered and complex creation and her episodic script is rich in both detail and depth. Like Brennan, Donoghue is no stranger to the extraordinary turn of phrase and the writing at times is exquisite. Some episodes, as when Brennan is trying to write while her husband is waiting to go out, are extraordinarily rich despite their obvious economy. Director Annabelle Comyn moves deftly through each episode capturing its essence and moving the action briskly along throughout. Pace does slacken a little towards the end during a series of shorter episodes and the energy does feel a little scattered at times. This is in part due to Paul O'Mahony's shifting set design, where tables and chairs are constantly on the move and focus was constantly being redirected, not always as successfully as it might have. Awkward angles were problematic on occasion. Yet turning the stage into a scattered, fragmented and dishevelled space wonderfully conveyed something of Brennan's mental condition and hinted of the tragedy yet to come. However, this meant that the plays upbeat ending sounded something of a false note with which to end on.

The calibre of performances was extremely high throughout. Owen McDonnell as The New Yorker sub-editor St Clair McKelway and Darragh Kelly as cartoonist Charles Addams, were always engaging. As was the support cast of Barry Barnes, Steve Gunn and Michele Forbes. Lorcan Cranitch as the milk drinking William Shawn, Brennan's editor, literary pimp, unrequited lover and father figure was superb throughout. Catherine Walker's sublime Maeve Brennan was a sheer joy to behold. Nervously fidgeting, constantly rechecking her hair, fighting to maintain style and composure at all cost, Walker evoked something of Updike's description of Brennan as the sparrow. Replete with nervous, repetitive birdlike gestures, Walker's compelling performance captured Brennan's physical and psychic vulnerability, part rage, part ambition, part tears. Her portrayal of a woman trying to harness forces far stronger than her resilient but exhausted soul was capable of containing, was powerful and convincing. Yet this too undermined the plays upbeat ending, which didn't resonate with either the character as portrayed or with the historical facts.

With its New York man's world of smoke and martinis, there's something of *Mad Men* about *The Talk Of The Town*. There's also a hint of Carrie Bradshaw, albeit with more attitude, more of the city and just a little less of the sex. The ghost of Dorothy Parker is never far away and Holly Golightly,

from *Breakfast at Tiffany's* hovers nearby as a question to be answered. But *The Talk Of The Town* offers more than these influences or references. It bravely attempts to tell a compelling story of a truly remarkable woman, with a powerhouse performance right at the heart of it.

The Talk Of The Town runs at The Project Arts Centre until October 14th. Check venue for times. Admission is €25.00 - €30.00



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