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Dispatches from the Fringe: Christmas comes early in 'Our Island'

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Our Island by Barry McStay

Photo by Alan Tully used with kind permission of Tiger Dublin Fringe

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Rating: ★★★★★

Jack, who left Ireland for London some years ago, and Bradley, his English boyfriend, have invited Jack's parents to spend Christmas with them in their new London apartment. An uptight Jack isn't completely comfortable with the situation. Nor is the laid back Bradley. Nor for that matter are his parents, particularly Jack's mother Annie. Bring to the party Jack's exuberant ex-girlfriend Charlie, her no nonsense boyfriend Dean and Jack's soft spoken Dad Paul and you have all the ingredients for yet another dysfunctional, Irish family drama. And yes, "Our Island," the latest offering from playwright Barry McStay, is indeed another dysfunctional, Irish family drama. But it's one that will steal your heart.

Aside from a sort of prologue which tells how Jack and Bradley met, the action takes place over

the course of a Christmas Eve as all settle in and try negotiate the new normal of marriage equality meeting traditional family values. But traditions such as hanging special decorations on the Christmas tree or filling stockings with gifts full of personal meaning can conceal love, pain, desire and loss lying just beneath the surface. Some run, some need to walk in this new world. Others can't leave the old behind while others want to travel to Mars to find that place where they truly belong.

Barry McStay's delectable script is unashamedly romantic and unapologetically charming. It doesn't reinvent the wheel. Rather it feels steeped in the tradition of works such as George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart's "You Can't Take It With You" and "The Man Who Came To Dinner." There's also more than a hint of William Rose's "Guess Who's Coming To Dinner" about the whole affair. If Frank Capra we're still alive he might well want to turn "Our Island" into a piece of twenty first century Capra-corn. But if he did, he'd be well advised to leave directing duties to Maisie Lee.

Under Lee's masterful direction, "Our Island" is crafted into a sensitive, funny and deeply moving piece of theatre. And Lee knows how to cast, assembling an ensemble of six excellent performers, each seeming as if they were born to their role. Peter Corboy as the obsessively clean Jack, running from Ireland and his family, wanting to hide his sexuality in plain sight in the crowded streets of London, was utterly engaging. As was Rob Malone as Jack's quietly suffering boyfriend Bradley. Martin Maguire as Jack's Dad Paul, a mild mannered school teacher trying to hold them all together, and Bairbre Ní Chaoimh as Annie, Jack's deeply wounded mother struggling to come to terms with the past as well as the present were utterly convincing. As was Jamie O'Neill as the sneering, estate agent Dean, boyfriend to Jack's hard drinking, Ireland loving, motor mouth ex-girlfriend Charlie played by Siobhán Cullen, who lit up the stage with an incredible performance. Set designer Rebekka Duffy negotiated the tight space of the Project Cube to wonderful effect, allowing the audience to feel like guests at the family gathering in London, whose authenticity was reinforced by some impeccable work by accent coach Andrea Ainsworth.

While its tale of family foibles over a Christmas gathering may be as old as time, "Our Island" is a story of its time. But it's a story wonderfully told, featuring great characters with great dialogue directed and performed to perfection. You will laugh. Maybe even cry. But you won't be left unmoved. Christmas has come early this year. So treat yourself and your significant other to a magic carpet ride on the feel good show of the festival. It's pure magic.

"Our Island" by MIRARI Productions runs at the [Project Arts Centre](#) as part of the Tiger Dublin Fringe till September 13th.

Shows begins at 9.00 pm

Tickets: €15/€13

For further information go to [Project Arts Centre](#) or [Tiger Dublin Fringe](#)



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