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Festival Connect – DruidMurphy's Famine is a glorious feast

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Brian Doherty in DruidMurphy's Famine
Druid Theatre Company

Famine by Tom Murphy

Rating: ★★★★★

First produced over 40 years ago, [Tom Murphy's *Famine*](#) is a searing portrayal of the Irish psyche in adversity that still resonates today. Set in Glanconnor village, County Mayo during the Famine year of 1846, it opens at a wake for the deceased daughter of John Connor, Glanconnor's village leader from a long line of once were kings. Yet this is also a wake for another failed potato crop and for a community, country and a way of life on the verge of extinction. As Glanconnor's dwindling population are steadily decimated by the potato blight, British greed and governmental ineptitude, Connor struggles to keep his dying community from being torn apart. Faced with a rock and a hard place choice between probable death at home or transportation to Canada, Connor holds firm to a blind belief that God, the British Government or someone, somehow, somewhere will come along to make things right.

Despite its two hour and forty five minute performance time, Druid Theatre Company's production of *Famine* is never anything less than gripping. In *Famine*, Murphy's language is Murphy's language and that is the highest compliment you can pay it. Rich and evocative, with a beguiling

charm and deceptive simplicity, language has its own force and presence, full of musical, poetic and dramatic resonances. Director Garry Hynes, who has worked closely with Murphy since the 1980's, creates wonderful tableaux's and groupings in which Murphy's language is allowed flourish. Hynes' stage paintings are charged with emotion and at key moments, as when the church and the landlords discuss what is to be done with the scarecrow peasantry, composition, language and movement are married in a strikingly powerful fusion.

Performances are excellent throughout. Brian Doherty as the proud John Connor and Aaron Monaghan as the crippled Mickeleen O'Leary led a terrific cast which included Marie Mullen, Edward Clayton and Niall Buggy in a captivating performance as Father Daly. The design team behind set, lighting, sound, and costume, namely Francis O'Connor, Chris Davey, Gregory Clarke and Joan O'Cleary respectively, created a harrowing, minimalist backdrop, rusted, rustic and earthen. Sam Jackson's excellent minimalist score contributed to *Famine's* almost palpable dark mood and tragic atmosphere of death and despair.

Great Famine or Great Hunger? Murphy has no doubt who is responsible, but *Famine* is not about them. Rather it is a searing investigation of the Irish soul when faced with unimaginable adversity such as the horrors of hunger, starvation and death. The fight, flight and freeze response, the recourse to superstition, fear and blind faith in everything from God to Government, with pride and prayer proposed as possible solutions to the most powerful problems until it is too late. Here the roots of the Diaspora and mass immigration were born, often at great cost and with tragic consequences. By the end of 1847 over 5000 Irish had perished at sea off the Canadian coast and over 5000 more were buried at the quarantine station at Grosse Île on the St Lawrence River, the major point of entry to Canada. Thousands more also died in Québec City, Montreal, Kingston and other places throughout the promised land called Canada.

Famine runs as part of the DruidMurphy cycle, which also includes *Conversations on a Homecoming* and *A Whistle in the Dark*. Featuring work by one of Ireland's greatest living playwrights, one of its most consistently brilliant directors, a first rate cast and one of the best Irish theatre companies of the past five decades, DruidMurphy represents much of what is best in Irish theatre. This is an opportunity not to be missed. But if you can only get to see one, Druid Theatre Company's production of *Famine* is a theatrical tour de force showcasing one of the most significant Irish plays of the 20th century.

Famine runs at The Gaiety October 11th and 13th at 7.30.p.m. Tickets are €20.00 – €35.00

For information on the other plays in the DruidMurphy Cycle or its Cycle Day on October 13th go to:

<http://www.dublintheatrefestival.com/programme/display.asp?Eventid=617&m=>

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