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Dublin Theatre Festival 2015: take a return journey on 'The Train'

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The Train produced by Rough Magic

Photo by Ros Kavanagh used with kind permission of Dublin Theatre Festival

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Rating: ★★★★★

On May 22nd 1971, several Irish sisters decided they were doing it for themselves, whether Church, State, men, or women, liked it or not. Boarding the Belfast bound train at Connolly Station forty seven women travelled to Northern Ireland to buy contraceptives, intent on bringing them back to Dublin in direct contravention of Irish law. Not in secret, they wanted everyone to know. And certainly not with shame. Celebrating this landmark in Ireland's social and political history, Rough Magic's "The Train" explores the hopes, doubts, fears and determination of a group of women whose momentous act of defiance almost floundered in embarrassment. But a pill by any other name is still a pill, and jellies and johnnies might well win the day, even if you're not quite sure what to do with them. Solidarity, sisterhood and songs abound in "The Train," a politically powerful, hilariously funny production and undoubtedly the feel good show of the festival.

With book and lyrics by Arthur Riordan and music by Bill Whelan, "The Train" follows its motley crew as they prepare and undertake their historic journey, replete with big heels, big hats and an even bigger attitude. The Church is never far away and the Angel Mick, dressed in devil black, sneers and prowls, pronouncing his lacerating moral condemnation full of fire and brimstone. The pull between both camps hits home with Ireland's symbolic first couple, Adam and Aoife. Adam is happy to enjoy the benefits of birth control for the price of three Hail Mary's. Aoife feels two is enough in their bed without the Church joining them as well. As attitudes and values are challenged the personal cost is never far away, but if paradise is to be lost it might not have been worth having in the first place.

If "The Trains" political message is crystal clear, theatrically it's something of a happy mess at times. But director Lynne Parker ensures it's usually the good kind of mess, the kind that likes to challenge established order. Like a giant patchwork quilt, or Joan O'Clery's excellent costume designs, it's bright, big and garishly gorgeous in places. In others, its efforts to accommodate every idea, every perspective, means it loses its way at times, with some scenes and songs less strong than others. The message is undoubtedly bigger than the medium, but when it hits home it does so with great hilarity, rousing moments and some show stopping numbers. If its big finish feels a little hurried, it still gets everyone on their feet and vocally, throughout, all are on song.

Ciarán Bagnall's claustrophobic set and lighting evoke the darkness and grimness of the period, as well as cleverly concealing the musicians. Clare Barrett as Aoife and Emmet Kirwan as Adam are delightful as the young couple struggling to safely satisfy both the desires of the Church and their own carnal desires. Danielle Galligan, Kate Gilmore, Karen McCartney, Sophie Joe Watson and Lisa Lambe are excellent as the strong willed, strong minded, yet often vulnerable young women prepared to fight for the right to control their own bodies, with Lisa Lambe being an utter revelation. Darragh Kelly as the Angel Mick, seeming like a devilish villain in an old silent movie, is always terrific, serving as the elder statesmen of this predominately youthful cast.

"The Train's" central conflict might feel a little anachronistic to modern Irish audiences, but its central premise of women subjugated at the hands of religious authority is something that is still resonant today in many parts of the world and, some would argue, in Ireland. "The Train's" rallying call to solidarity, in all its messiness, against female subjugation in all its forms, is one many will respond to. In remembering a pivotal moment in Irish history, "The Train" is an enlightening, entertaining and educational production. With strong performances, some terrific songs, brimming with heartfelt humour and honesty, it's also an enjoyable, feel good night of musical theatre. For both these reasons, go see it twice.

'The Train' by Arthur Riordan and Bill Whelan, produced by Rough Magic, runs at the [Project Arts Centre](#) as part of the [Dublin Theatre Festival](#) until Oct 11th, with an extended run until Oct 17th

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



Chris O'Rourke
Theatre Examiner

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