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Druid's "Big Maggie" is a tour de force

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Emmet Byrne, Karen McCartney, Aisling O'Sullivan, Muiris Crolwey and Charlotte McCurry in Druid's production of Big Maggie

Matthew Thompson

Big Maggie by John B.Keane, directed by Garry Hynes

Rating: ★★★★★

The myth of the Irish Mammy, along with notions of Mother Ireland, loom large in the Irish imagination. From Yeats' 'Cathleen Ni Houlihan' to Brendan O'Carroll's 'Mrs Brown's Boys,' notions of Irish motherhood have been romanticised and sentimentalised to huge, popular acclaim. Yet in 1969 John B Keane's 'Big Maggie' stripped away that romance and sentimentality, offering a very different portrait of the Irish mother. One far darker. In [Druid's](#) current production of 'Big Maggie', back at The Gaiety by popular demand, Keane's scathing attack on the myth of the Irish mother serves as a scathing indictment of contemporary Ireland, in a powerful production which marries a high brow, intellectual rigour with some good old, low brow entertainment.

As sods of clay land on the coffin of her recently deceased husband, the widowed Maggie Polpin strikes a bargain at the back of an open hearse before returning to open the family shop for

business. The love of money may be the root of all evil, but Maggie knows it makes the world go around. For money is power and independence, and with her reprobate husband now dead Maggie holds the family purse strings and is intent on making damn sure no one will ever take what's hers away from her. Not even her children, no matter what promises were made about inheritance. Like some ruthless corporate executive, Maggie's preoccupation lies with money, its holding and having, with paying and collecting debts, recording transactions and setting out her austere, non-negotiable terms for her children. A Mother Ireland for the beginning of the 21st century. Family comes a distorted second to her self-preservation, which comes at a heavy price. But one Maggie is willing to pay in a world where survival leaves no room for sentimentality and it's her way or the highway.

Director Garry Hynes ensures her excellent cast rise to the challenge of walking that fine line between hilarity and seriousness without toppling irretrievably into either one. Frank O'Sullivan and Joan Sheehy as nosey neighbours, along with Clare Barrett and Clare Monnelly as Mrs Madden and her daughter Mary respectively, are strong throughout in supporting roles. Emmet Byrne as the defiant Mick, Muiris Crowley as the hapless Maurice, Karen McCartney as the innocent Gert and Charlotte McCurry as the woman child Katie, Maggie's brood of sinning and sinned against children, are each compelling. John Olohan as the sculptor and suitor Byrne is a sheer joy, as is Keith Duffy as the posturing playboy Teddy, bringing something of the pantomime and popular appeal which Keane's work has often enjoyed. Strutting about, leading with his crotch, Duffy's likeable yet loathsome lothario is always engaging. Aisling O'Sullivan as the hard hearted, matriarch Maggie Polpin, fleshing out the unlikeable Maggie into a character both recognisable and understandable, gives a truly remarkable performance capturing the strength, determination and hidden vulnerability behind the relentless force of nature that is Big Maggie.

Like 'Mrs Brown's Boys,' Keane's 'Big Maggie' contains sharp observations and snappy exchanges, all steeped in the humour and ordinariness of the everyday. Crammed pack with laughter, its laughter is laced with venom and is all the more delicious for it. Yet behind the laughter something serious is being said and questioned. If Keane's work is defined by a seriousness of intent coupled with the ingredients of popular appeal, director Garry Hynes does a magnificent job in ensuring both are given play. The balance and synergy achieved cracks open the dark heart at the centre of 'Big Maggie' releasing something bold, wild, dangerous and hilarious in this truly excellent production.

'Big Maggie' by John B. Keane, directed by Garry Hynes and produced by Druid runs at The Gaiety Theatre for an extended run until March 12th.

For information on time and tickets visit [The Gaiety Theatre](#)



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