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Brokentalkers chillingly brilliant "The Blue Boy"

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The Blue Boy by Brokentalkers
Daniel Keane

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Rating: ★★★★★

Cesar Cruz's oft quoted "art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable" offers an apt description for Brokentalkers brilliant production 'The Blue Boy,' which raises uncomfortable questions about the systematic child abuse carried out by the Catholic Church since the founding of the Irish State in 1922. Demonised and dehumanised simply for being born out of wedlock, orphaned young children were regularly subjected to corporal punishment, rape and all manner of mental, physical and emotional violence. Their constitutionally enshrined rights ignored and trampled upon all in the name of Mother Church. Haunting, harrowing, deeply disturbing and utterly moving, 'The Blue Boy' is a theatrical tour de force that serves as a chilling indictment of the nationalised, normalised and institutionalised child abuse that was carried out for decades.

Much of 'The Blue Boy' concerns itself with The Artane Industrial School from which the title derives. Like Goldenbridge or the Magdalene Laundries for young women, The Artane Industrial School for young boys was essentially a concentration camp for Catholic children where inmates, detained by order of the Dublin Children's Court, were held by the State until they were 16. There they were subject to beatings, starvation, humiliation, child labour and, on more than occasion, death. Like the prison orchestras that played in Nazi concentration camps, the world renowned Artane Boys Band, playing before presidents and adorning the cover of an INXS album, were there simply to reassure a willingly gullible public. All a lie, as the Ryan Report recognised, acknowledging that the Artane Boys Band was simply "the public face" of the school. A beautified Dorian Gray with the hidden reality too horrific to be seen in the clear light of day.

In 'The Blue Boy' the medium is equally as powerful as the message. Incorporating a variety of styles and genres, 'The Blue Boy's' theatrical potency is derived not so much from its fracturing and fragmenting, but from the resulting alchemy achieved by the integration of its diverse styles, influences and talents. The sense of a multi-talented, collaborative ensemble is strong, with emphasis focusing on the work rather than the recognition. Both set and costumes, both of which were excellent, are unaccredited and all performers perform in mask apart from the narrator.

Set marries a translucent screen with walls and desks evoking a cold, communist like prison austerity. Costumes conjure 'The Blue Boy's' nameless, faceless and voiceless young whilst simultaneously evoking notions of horror, seeming to reference Michael Myers from the Halloween movie series. Physicality is hugely significant in providing some sort of vocabulary for the voiceless, with the sporadic narrative and recorded interviews providing context and a reminder of the lived experience. At times movements seem to transcend the limits of the physical, evoking the eerie, disjointed movements of video games like 'Silent Hill.' The cumulative effect is deeply disturbing, with episodic interlinked scenes along with repeated patterns and gestures creating a rich physical landscape to accompany the recorded interviews. Directors Gary Keegan and Feidlim Cannon ensure their eclectic ensemble of playwright Dylan Coburn Gray, Junk Ensemble's Megan and Jessica Kennedy, visual artist Lucy Andrews, choreographer Eddie Kay and dancer and theatre maker Aoife Moore do an astounding job. As does lighting designer Sarah Jane Shiels whose incredibly evocative design sets the bar so high, others will only be able to look upon it in envy.

In fairness, not everything always runs smoothly. At times music drowns out interviews and live action fights with projection for the audience's attentions. Some sequences are also stronger than others, such as the heart breaking sequence in which sign language articulates the lyrics of Otis Redding's 'These Arms of Mine' capturing all that could never be heard. But these are minor concerns. Ultimately 'The Blue Boy' proclaims that you cannot defend the indefensible which allowed the defenceless to suffer needlessly. It will also ensure that you will never look at a set of rosary beads in the same way again. Powerful, thematically and theatrically, 'The Blue Boy' is the yardstick against which all similar shows will be compared and found wanting. For 'The Blue Boy' is Beethoven, Roxy Music, Springsteen, Metallica. 'The Blue Boy' is simply that good and not to be missed under any circumstance.

'The Blue Boy' by Brokentalkers is currently on tour.

For more information visit [Brokentalkers](#)



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