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Homage and history in a delightful 'Northern Star'

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Paul Mallon and Charlotte McCurry in Northern Star
Keith Dixon

Northern Star by Stewart Parker directed by Lynne Parker

Rating: ★★★★★

In 1984, Stewart Parker's "Northern Star" premiered in Belfast, posing big, important questions to an audience right at the heart of The Troubles. The act of producing "Northern Star" at that time, in a hotbed of sectarian violence, was in itself a daring and politically charged act, irrespective of the plays challenging content. Thirty-two years later as the Irish Republic commemorates the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising, Parker's niece, director Lynne Parker, and her company Rough Magic, have set about producing "Northern Star" for a contemporary audience. In the intervening years much has happened, including Stewart Parker's untimely death in 1988 and the signing of The Good Friday agreement. A vastly changed and changing Ireland, both North and South, has begun to emerge. One in which Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland are attempting to negotiate a new normal beyond violence. To this debate "Northern Star" has some interesting

things to contribute. And it has certainly lost none of its ability to entertain. But if "Northern Star" still has relevance, it no longer retains that same urgency and immediacy, seeming at times like a historical document in itself, part of the very history it sets out to interrogate. Where "Northern Star" truly excels is in paying homage to one of Ireland's most important playwrights of the late twentieth century, serving as a poignant, thoughtful and funny reminder of the talent and charm that was Stewart Parker.

In "Northern Star," Henry Joy McCracken, one of the leaders of the failed Rising of 1798, lies in hiding with his mistress and their child in a haunted house in Belfast. Here, in a detailed act of soul searching, he questions the Rising, the conflict between love of family and love of country and wonders about the point of it all. Like some charismatic Scrooge haunted by ghosts of his past, present and future, McCracken watches and listens to various incarnations of the seven ages of himself. Each adding another dimension to his story, revealed in a different, and highly exaggerated style from the Irish theatrical canon. From Boucicault to Wilde to Beckett, Parker's meta theatrical mongrel interrogates the Irish theatrical canon as much as Irish history in a deeply entertaining and insightful manner that adds much to "Northern Star's" rich vein of humour. Light on character and big on debate, "Northern Star" is dominated less by monologues and more by speeches as it takes us on a thoughtful and thought provoking journey through 1798, Irish politics and Irish theatre history in the shape of a man knowingly choosing self-sacrifice in the name of Irish freedom.

"Northern Star" is an obvious labour of love for director Lynne Parker, who brings out the rich layers, obvious and subtle, in this complex work. An excellent set design by Zia Holly positions the action in the wings of a theatre, a liminal space where possibilities can be interrogated before finally being performed. Paul Mallon as the deeply troubled Henry Joy McCracken and Charlotte McCurry as his lover Mary Bodle were both engaging and ably supported by a first rate cast. With each member playing multiple roles, including multiple versions of McCracken, as well as playing drums, bodhrán and tin whistles, cast members Richard Clements, Darragh Kelly, Eleanor Methven, Rory Nolan, Robbie O'Connor and Ali White, were all excellent, with Darragh Kelly being particularly noteworthy.

Despite McCracken's views on the missed opportunities of Irish history and of Ireland's "botched birth," Ireland somehow survived its birthing and is moving on. Trying to grow up in the 21st century, the question of where do we now go as a nation when there's no one but ourselves to blame is hugely significant. Are we doomed to repeat history? As a history lesson as well as a lecture on history, both Irish and theatrical, Stewart Parker's "Northern Star," divorced from the era of its own birthing, loses something of its potency and punch. Closing on Stiff Little Fingers, 1979 classic "Alternative Ulster" only reinforced this sense of "Northern Star" feeling retro. Yet "Northern Star" still has much to offer to the debate on Ireland's future. And as a testament to Stewart Parker's intelligence, charm, warmth and humour, to his deep insight and his deep love of theatre, "Northern Star" is both a fitting tribute and a wonderful theatrical experience.

"Northern Star" by Stewart Parker, directed by Lynne Parker and produced by Rough Magic runs at [The Project Arts Centre](#) until May 7th

The Tron Theatre, Glasgow from May 11th to May 14th

The Lyric Theatre, Belfast from May 17th to May 29th

For more information, visit [The Project Arts Centre](#) or [Rough Magic](#)



Chris O'Rourke
Theatre Examiner

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