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Festival Connect - A beautiful Shibari makes for a near perfect arrangement

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Shibari by Gary Duggan
The Abbey Theatre

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Rating: ★★★★★

The world's a small place and Dublin's only a pretend city where everyone exists amidst two degrees of separation. A city where, if you hang around long enough, you too may recognise the strangers you pass by every day. In Gary Duggan's provocative new play *Shibari*, questions of Irish identity are challenged in a multi-cultural, multi-national, multi-racial Dublin where six singles try to negotiate their way around love, trust, identity and bondage.

Deftly dealing with any obvious associations in the opening few seconds, *Shibari* introduces Ioana, a Romanian shop assistant perusing a book on Japanese bondage. Ioana is caught in a relationship that is floundering and caught in the act of gazing at bondage photos by Nick, a shallow English actor trying to salvage his reputation following a sex tape scandal that ruined his

marriage. The soft spoken Hideo, a Japanese florist and small businessman, crafts unique flower arrangements for a living and is trying to come to terms with the death of his Irish wife. Coming to terms with her husband's suicide is Marie, a woman also trying to make sense of her husband's infidelity. Her sister, the super bitch and super cynical Eva, a team leader who sells advertising space, is having to face some thorny issues while being plagued by the attentions of Nick, having stolen whatever remains of whatever he calls a heart following a one night stand of sex and cocaine. Liam, a couch potato and dressed up gossip columnist, is thinking of breaking up with Ioana in case he might get the opportunity to sleep with a Pussycat Doll. So the circle closes on a not so tight knit group in which ties don't so much bind as hang like loose ends.

Aside from the maternal Marie, the Irish characters have very little redeeming features, being prepared to betray confidences and cheat on loved ones. But who are the Irish? What constitutes the Irish and their culture? Can one just decide to be Irish? In *Shibari* the strongest cultural references are Japanese and symbols of traditional Irish culture, along with those of the family home, are flipped on their head, literally, fading into the shadows yet lingering like some half present memory. Here people move through a landscape of florists, steam rooms, theatres, night clubs, book shops, restaurants or dance classes, seeking out their next pleasure fix. This could be anywhere; it's just geography, rather than culture, that gives it the name Dublin.

Bathed in red light, Frank Conway's clever set design looked seedy and sexy at times, full of Japanese simplicity yet reminiscent of the darkened, back room of a sex club where all kinds of naughtiness are indulged in, or so they say. Dennis Clohessy's sensitive soundtrack gave texture and mood to people adrift looking for connections.

If *Shibari's* approach to its questions was always fearless, its episodic tale of six twenty and thirty somethings living in the city felt clichéd at times, as did some of its characters. However Tony Creed's excellent direction ensured performances never were. Michael Yare as Nick, Janet Moran as Marie and Kate Nic Chonaonaigh as Eva, brought depth and dimension to what could otherwise have been character sketches. Ian Lloyd Anderson was terrific as the likeably unlikeable Liam and Hideo, the shy, artistic florist, was played to perfection by Orion Lee. Alicja Ayres' strong willed and sexually curious Ioana was utterly captivating and lit up the stage, most notable during *Shibari's* final scene.

Despite its challenging questions, at heart *Shibari* is a twisting, episodic redemption tale where redemption might just be found in giving up drink for Lent, forgiving the unforgivable or allowing yourself to bind, or be bound, in an act of total trust. And if all of its stories don't have tidy endings, maybe that's because *Shibari* is the theatrical equivalent of an Ikebana flower arrangement: a once off, unique gathering of disparate elements sensitively crafted to create a visually impressive, wonderfully engaging and thought provoking production.

Shibari runs at The Peacock Theatre till November 3rd. Doors open Monday to Saturday at 8.00pm, with a Saturday Matinee at 2.30pm. Tickets €18 – €25 (€13 – €18 Concession)



Chris O'Rourke
Tulsa Theater Examiner

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