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# Dublin Theatre Festival 2015: 'Newcastlewest' is like kinda good

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## Newcastlewest by Dick Walsh

Rating: ★★★★★

Something familiar gets an unfamiliar twist in the intriguing "Newcastlewest," written by Dick Walsh and produced by Pan Pan Theatre. Inspired by an episode in Tolstoy's "War and Peace" where devout Princess Marya Bolkonskaya, living with her domineering father, is faced with the choice of leaving when a suitor arrives, "Newcastlewest" transposes the events to contemporary Ireland. In its exploration of randomness it strikes another rich vein, exposing the controlling and abusive nature of patriarchal power. Described as a post dramatic aesthetic that embraces narrative aspects of theatre, "Newcastlewest's" banal realism is anything but banal and strives for a glimpse of heaven beyond the trash blocking the view.

The narrative is simple. Crippled Marya, living with her abusive father Aengus, considers leaving when Doug, a friend of a friend Kate, comes calling with the possibility of a job in Brussels. Around

this conversations and monologues about dodgy business associates, lying on your CV, bad relationship history, what to do with your life and the joys of working in Brussels have the appearance of the random and everyday. Potatoes are boiled, shopping unpacked, laundry folded, but behind each ordinary task something is stirring. As songs are sung, whiskey drunk and sex is had before breakfast it's all intentionally banal. When the resolution is finally announced it comes not as a bang, not even as a whimper. It just comes.

Dick Walsh's dark and funny script may deliberately court randomness, but there's nothing haphazard about it. There's a lively intelligence at work and the dialogue captures the viciousness and selfishness of soul destroying men who mentally, emotionally and physically abuse. Domesticated men, who give orders in the kitchen, refold laundry the right way and tell you you're certifiable because it's the truth. Damaged women who have normalised their dependency and wonder fruitlessly about failed relationships and stuff they'd be good at but never do.

Gavin Quinn's direction deliberately strips away any suggestion of conventional realism with some clever staging and strong performance choices. Props resonate with deeper meanings and a leg brace and unpacked shopping reference beyond the obvious. Minimalism of movement, along with direct gazing at the audience, creates an unsettling effect it takes some moments to attune to. Annabell Rickerby is utterly intriguing and always compelling as the crippled daughter Marya, thirty going on thirteen, speaking and singing her thoughts with, you know, like, a touch of whatever. Una McKeivitt, as the relationship failing Kate, is equally compelling, as is Dick Walsh as the self-obsessed Doug. Des Nealon turns in a wonderful performance as the spiteful, bitter and abusive Aengus, manipulating and controlling as is his right. All are ably supported by human puppet masters Gráinne Hallahan and Daphne Oikonomopoulou and by an atmospheric soundtrack, sometimes thumping, often ambient, brought to life by sound designer Vincent Doherty.

Self-obsession unites both sexes in "Newcastlewest" but with the men it's always obsession with power. Power they have, power they had and the power they can exercise over women. The women's obsessions are less focused, often imbued with an apathy bordering on indifference. And it's all frighteningly and perfectly normally. But "Newcastlewest" is anything but normal. It's a brave, clever and funny production that strives to realise something of a new aesthetic. Does it succeed? Well yeah like, you know babes, totally.

"Newcastlewest" by Dick Walsh, produced by Pan Pan Theatre, runs at [Smock Alley Theatre](#) as part of the [Dublin Theatre Festival](#).

For information on dates, times and tickets visit [Dublin Theatre Festival](#) or [Smoack Alley Theatre](#)

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