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Dublin Theatre Festival 2013 - Tragedy strikes under the elms

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Desire Under The Elms by Corn Exchange
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Rating: ★★★★★

Written in 1924, Eugene O'Neill's, *Desire Under The Elms* attempts to fuse Greek tragedy with the New England landscape of 1850's America. References come hard and fast as relationships between fathers, sons and mothers draw on everything from Oedipus to Medea in a tale of biblical proportions that would give Freudians a field day. In Corn Exchange's interpretation, O'Neill's themes of greed and family are very much in evidence, but despite some interesting moments, they aren't resolved as successfully as they might have been in this brave and ambitious production.

Desire Under The Elms tells a tale of land, inheritance, fathers, mothers and sons. Three brothers, all farmers, await the return of their father as they discuss their situation over dinner. Two of the

brothers, Simeon and Peter, express their desire to leave the farm and strike out for Calif-or-ni-a. The third, Eben, their stepbrother, offers to buy their inheritance from them so that he alone can inherit the farm when their father, Ephraim, dies. A deal is struck as the patriarch returns with Abbie, a new wife, scuppering Eben's plans. Complications ensue as the sultry Abbie boldly claims the farm for herself. But desire kicks in and a relationship grows between Abbie and Eben, yielding tragic consequences for all concerned.

Director Annie Ryan makes some key choices including cutting the cast of secondary characters and performing the text in a Northern Irish accent. If the former lends to a more concentrated interpretation, the latter wasn't as successful. If rhythms are similar, the accent struggled to accommodate Americanisms like purty and critter and frequently jarred. Like the eponymous elms, there was little desire in evidence as eroticism was sacrificed to the text's darker themes evidenced by the stark, hard set. Comprised of dirt, wood and a grey washed, back wall the set disrupted any connection with descriptions of golden sunsets and sunrises or with desire. Similarly, the use of two, steel-legged chairs against a rustic table and utensils disrupted any connection with context or place, either real or imagined. Costumes too were problematic regarding context, with Peter looking like a modern, stereotypical redneck, replete with baseball cap, while Simeon looked like a country bumpkin straight out of Huckleberry Finn.

Performances also struggled to resolve a number of difficulties. Even accepting the heightened theatricality in play, delivery felt labored at times causing pace to drag and articulation wasn't always as clear as it might have been. The physicality of characters was continuously grandiose and seemed to struggle within these limitations to reveal the text's subtler and softer nuances. But where this production does succeed is in addressing the question of gender in the text, highlighting the entrapment of both men and women in a landscape where patriarchy destroys all.

One cannot fault the commitment of its excellent cast of Fionn Walton as the Eben, Luke Griffin as Simeon, Peter Cabot as Peter, Janet Moran as Abbie and Lalor Roddy as Ephraim. And one can only applaud Annie Ryan for bravely daring to chart new territory. But *Desire Under The Elms* falls short of its own ambitions and of the standards set by previous Corn Exchange productions such as the excellent *Man Of Valour*.



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