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'The Wake' is directed to near perfection

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Aisling O'Sullivan (Vera) in *The Wake* by Tom Murphy, directed by Annabelle Comyn
Ros Kavanagh

The Wake by Tom Murphy directed by Annabelle Comyn

Rating: ★★★★★

Soon as there's a death, there's bound to be a relative nearby. Tom Murphy's 1998 play "The Wake," which makes a welcome return to [The Abbey Theatre](#) as part of their "Waking The Nation" season, sees forgotten sister and granddaughter, Vera, returning to Ireland to pay her last respects to the grandmother who raised her. A grandmother she was never told had died, whose hotel, and Vera's inheritance, Vera's siblings secretly hope to auction for themselves. But Vera has dark secrets of her own hidden back in New York. In a landscape where home is a hotel and wakes are held in the absence of a corpse, dysfunctional Ireland is interrogated and illuminated as institutions and insanity, family, home, loneliness and identity, to name but a few, are all subjected to Murphy's withering and humorous gaze, in a searingly brilliant, stunningly beautiful production.

Not that "The Wake" is without its problems. There's something disjointed about Murphy's structure, which often feels like a composite of juxtaposed scenes with a narrow through line on

which everything hangs. That through line being the character of Vera whose journey is the only one explored or undertaken. But such is the strength of Murphy's individual scenes and characters that they're often breath taking. Often, but not always. The pace, post interval, slows down considerably, and the end risks the energy simply draining away, with action confined to musical interludes and a poetry recital that overstayed their welcome. As is often the case with Murphy alcohol looms large in proceedings, almost functioning like another character, one who loosens lips and inhibitions, allowing for a Dionysian liberation where things can be said, done and excused all at the same time, with respectability once again being restored afterwards.

In the hands of a lesser director this could have proven problematic, but director Annabelle Comyn manages to take "The Wake's" minor imperfections and transform them, like a birth mark or a beauty spot, into little blemishes of near perfection. The duet between Pat Nolan and Lorcan Cranitch during the overly long wake being a case in point, with Nolan and Cranitch delivering an absolute delight. Around her Comyn has assembled a sterling cast and crew with Paul O'Mahony's complex yet simple set design being a serious contender for design of the year. Sinéad McKenna's lighting design is also a worthy award nominee, with "The Wake's" opening sequence being particularly stunning. Philip Stewart's compositions and sound design is deeply engaging and successful, adding mood and dimension particularly during transitions.

"The Wake's" ensemble cast are also memorable with James O'Donoghue as the young Norman, a role shared with Jasper Cahill, making their Abbey debut. Supporting cast of Nichola MacEvilly as the kooky Catriona and Ruth McCabe as the widowed Mrs Conneeley are both strong. Vera's siblings in the shape of Kelly Campbell as the chain smoking and plotting Mary Jane, Tina Kellegher as a long suffering mother Marcia, and Lorcan Cranitch as the bungling Tom were each compelling. As was Pat Nolan as the conflict avoiding Father Billy. Brian Doherty as Vera's former boyfriend Finbar, a man so down on his luck he thinks it's up, and Frank McCusker as the unfaithful Henry, are both engaging and wonderful foils to Vera's wild, unapologetic, exuberant defiance. But while all are strong, with the chemistry often palpable, Aisling O'Sullivan is earth shatteringly good, delivering Vera as a raw, visceral, almost primal force at times. Anyone can take their clothes off, few can get truly naked like O'Sullivan can, an actress rapidly proving herself to be one of this generation's outstanding female performers.

It would be reductive to limit "The Wake" to particular interpretative possibilities, even if certain themes such as the institutionalisation of those deemed unfit loom large. "The Wake," like Tolstoy's "War and Peace" is densely rich, and at almost three hours in length, covers a lot of ground. But under Comyn's astute direction it never wanes, is rarely taxing, and is as rich and funny today as it was eighteen years ago, confirming Murphy's reputation as Ireland's greatest living playwright. An orgy of theatrical delight, "The Wake" is one of this summer's must see shows.

"The Wake" by Tom Murphy, directed by Annabelle Comyn, runs at The Abbey Theatre until July 30th.

For information on times and tickets visit [The Abbey Theatre](#)

Be advised, this show contains nudity and extensive use of herbal cigarettes



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