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Dispatches from The Fringe – Peig Sayers Is Still Hard Work

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Eating Seals and Seagulls' Eggs by Little Wolf Productions
Ros Kavanagh

Eating Seals and Seagulls' Eggs by Caitriona Ní Mhurchú, Little Wolf Productions

Rating: ★★★★★

For many Irish people the name Peig Sayers will forever be reviled. Cited by some as the reason for immigration and the decline of interest in the Irish language, Sayers appears to have enjoyed more respect from tourists than she ever did at home. Her sombre biography, *Peig*, once a compulsory part of the secondary school syllabus for decades, is synonymous with Catholic school notions of Irishness and education that a younger generation wanted to leave behind. Dark, dreary, steeped in poverty, death and misery, *Peig* was the dread of many a young schoolchild as much for the manner in which it was taught as for its content. In *Eating Seals and Seagulls' Eggs* by Little Wolf Productions, performers Caitriona Ní Mhurchú and Louise Lewis bravely attempt to retell and reclaim the story of Sayers and of the Great Blasket Island. But

despite such lofty ambitions and some beautifully crafted moments, the end result is hard work, frequently dreary and often difficult to follow.

In *Eating Seals and Seagulls' Eggs*, Caitríona Ní Mhurchú as Sayer's ghost carries herself with a world-weary, aloofness as she recounts factual and fictitious episodes from her life, ranging from her poorly attended funeral to the tragic death of her son. Supported by Louise Lewis in a range of roles, including a young girl who was bullied for being able to speak Irish, conversations take meandering twists with Lewis providing most of the sparse and much needed humour. While the inclusion of Irish language segments gave some sections added dimension, throughout, dialogue preached to the converted, with references and allusions that were often unclear and confusing to those not in the know.

If character, story and dialogue struggled to engage, visually *Eating Seals and Seagulls' Eggs* was most successful. Adam Gibney's projection of archive material onto a large, white screen and several, small television screens captured a sense of a world long gone, a world of test cards and black and white television. Ní Mhurchú and Lewis were at their finest when crafting striking, physical moments, using tape reels and chairs to terrific effect. Sound designers Niall Toner and Les Kaye's subtle soundscape of voices, music and gently lapping waves brought an atmospheric stillness to proceedings, being particularly effective when conveying the negative criticism Sayers has been subjected to.

In recent decades the Irish language has been reclaimed as a source of national pride. The same cannot be said of Peig Sayers, who has often been represented as a figure of ridicule. Perhaps it was timing. When Irish youth was striving to free itself from the shackles of the past and reinvent itself, Sayers represented that past with its values, poverty, misery and dreariness. Perhaps, because of this, and the manner in which she was taught, she has never been truly accorded the respect she deserves. Alas, in its efforts to reclaim Sayers, *Eating Seals and Seagulls' Eggs* succeeds in driving her even further into the past. Like the Great Blasket Island, Sayers may well be only three miles across the sound, but in *Eating Seals and Seagulls' Eggs* she still seems five hundred years away.

Eating Seals and Seagulls' Eggs by Little Wolf Productions runs as part of The [Tiger Dublin Fringe](#) at The Project Arts Centre Cube until Saturday, September 20th

Doors open 9.00 p.m.

Tickets €15.00 Concessions €13.00

For more information go to <http://fringefest.com/festival/programme>



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