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Dublin Theatre Festival 2013 - Families lost within The Hanging Gardens

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The Hanging Gardens by Frank McGuinness
The Abbey Theatre

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Rating: ★★★★★

Much preferring their own company, the Grant family find themselves unable to connect with the world outside Babylon. Damned by successes, failures, pregnancy or sexuality, all want to return home or to never have to leave. Seeking sanctuary and escape, they hide behind Babylon's high walls, in a self-created, dysfunctional idyll seeking to protect, and the protection of, their king. But their king is plummeting headlong into Lear like lunacy. In Frank McGuinness' symbolically rich *The Hanging Gardens*, Babylon is a large house in Buncrana, County Donegal. Its legendary hanging gardens a small, round, red brick patio surrounded by lush green grass and high, rust colored walls. Its king an ageing writer and patriarch sliding into dementia. Between the real and the reimagined, Frank McGuinness' *The Hanging Gardens* occupies an uneasy space where fathers', families and futures past are all found wanting and in need of rescue. But will it come?

In this ambitious production, character and story are often secondary to its themes and symbolism.

Feeling at times like a poem adrift in too many metaphors, *The Hanging Gardens* didn't always do enough to define characters or support their relationships, aside from its failing patriarch, with characters operating primarily as supports for his semi lucid ramblings. Which is a pity for *The Hanging Gardens* was undeniably at its strongest when concerned with the human rather than the abstract. Patrick Mason's direction, in conjunction with Michael Pavelka's set design, kept this focus on the plays themes and symbolism. Indeed the garden patio resembled a miniature Greek auditorium, a sort of stage within a stage, where Sam's tragic story was played out against a sundial counting down the hours.

Mason ensured his excellent cast produced some strong performances. Declan Conlon, as the embittered son Charlie, obsessed with his own sense of martyrdom and entitlement, Cathy Belton, as Rachel, a pregnant daughter and barrister of dubious success and Marty Rea as the youngest child Maurice, struggling with heartache and his own sexuality were each individually strong. Barbara Brennan was equally convincing as the matriarchal Jane. But this was Sam's story, played convincingly and superbly by Niall Buggy. Buggy's subtly layered performance of the declining Sam, at times a tyrant, at others an impetuous child, was wonderful realized. His poignant and passionate portrayal of a waning patriarch raging against the dying of the light was a genuine delight.

Walls don't just keep things out, they also keep things in. In *The Hanging Gardens* family is not just sanctuary, it's also a prison and one often self imposed. Throughout, people talk of leaving, but no one ever really leaves. What they really seem to want is sharing Walton like half hugs, sentimental songs and romanticized expressions of love, life and togetherness. But McGuinness knows such aspirations are short lived and often conceal a greater need underneath. When unfulfilled, what remains is adults whining about their parents, their lives, their families, their histories and their grievances. Whining, despite a mothers warning not to do so. If at times they risked turning *The Hanging Gardens* into the nagging gardens, fortunately this was avoided. Though theme and metaphor dominated, humanity remained throughout. Coated in McGuinness' wonderfully rich language and delivered by a first rate cast with a world class performance by Niall Buggy, *The Hanging Gardens* is a brave exploration of an insular family rooted inescapably in its own unhappiness and a stunning portrayal of a man slowly losing his mind.

The Hanging Gardens runs at [The Abbey Theatre](http://www.abbeytheatre.ie) until November 9th. For information on times and tickets please go to the following link: <http://www.abbeytheatre.ie>



Chris O'Rourke
Tulsa Theater Examiner

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