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Festival Connect- Summer lovin' is less than a blast

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The Last Summer by Declan Hughes
Gate Theatre

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Rating: ★★★★★

The summer of 1977, four young lads prepare for their first gig while they await their Leaving Cert results, after which some will scatter to the winds or disappear. Jump forward to the summer of 2007 and an old breeze blows back into town to claim the woman he should have married many years before. In between there's the discovery of the clitoris, secrets from 1989 but very little else in Declan Hughes' disappointingly lackluster *The Last Summer*.

In *The Last Summer*, conversation after conversation after conversation takes place without any real action of any real significance. Weaving back and forth between the two different time periods, talk begins with a scene reminiscent of *Grease*, where Danny Zuko regales his fellow T-Birds about his recent conquest. In this case Zuko is Paul, the bands guitarist with literary

aspirations, who talks about Rush, Rand and Gatsby and of his latest conquest, the girl all the bad guys want, Caroline Brady. Wild, sexy and curious, Caroline's not afraid of flashing at passing yachts or of trying out a whole pack of twelve condoms, if only Paul can get his hands on them. A tortured lead singer Kevin, a secretly gay drummer Larry and a belligerent bassists Tom rounds out this group of Partridge Family lookalikes who fancy themselves as the next Rush.

Jumping to 2007, we find the same characters are suddenly a lot older, but none the wiser. Paul is a professor in the States and author of a nonfiction show-and-tell novel which selectively recounts his time growing up in Dublin. Larry, a real estate agent, is openly gay and the extremely wealthy Tom is now married to Caroline Brady, who is still hot to trot for Paul. In the end, choices are made and secrets revealed, but there just wasn't enough urgency or interest generated to make you really care about, or connect with, these characters or their conversations.

With language overly conscious of referencing its time periods, supported by a seventies sound-bite soundtrack, the end result was a production and script that felt more akin to a discussion of '77 and '07 rather than a recreation. Essentially, the foundations were unsound throughout. Toby Frow's direction permitted too many conversations to stand motionless, creating a static energy onstage that didn't translate to the audience. The revolving set design by Robert Innes Hopkins was never truly as effective as it might have been. A wall revolving to reveal yet another, almost identical wall didn't avail of the possibilities the halved stage made available, aside from creating a pub scene in the second act.

However, Frow did elicit some fine performances from a strong cast. Paul Connaughton, James Murphy, Kevin Shackleton and Sam McGovern as the youthful Tom, Larry, Kevin and Paul respectively were all engaging. Clare O'Malley as the young Caroline Brady, doubling up as Caroline's daughter Michelle, was wonderfully captivating, exuding just the right amount of ditzy sex appeal. Declan Conlon, Gary Lydon and Peter Hanly, as the elder Paul, Tom and Larry were particularly impressive, most notably during the pub scene. Cathy Belton as the older Caroline gave a strong performance of a woman trapped by dreams and desires she can neither let go of nor fulfill.

The 2007 segments were more satisfying throughout as secrets were revealed and the true nature of characters came to the fore. But *The Last Summer* lacked urgency, with stakes too low and too few to truly matter. With too much talk, too many cultural references and too many scenes that felt like they had been done before, from the get-away-from-here-and-never-look-back speech of Good Will Hunting to the mystery surrounding a band's lead singer à la Eddie and the Cruisers, *The Last Summer* felt like a story that could have been much more charming and compelling if only it had said less and shown more.

The Last Summer runs at The Gate Theatre until October 13th. Doors open at 7.30pm. Tickets are €25.00 - €35.00



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