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J.M. Synge's tales of the wild west

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Brendan Conroy in *The Aran Islands*
Joe O'Byrne

The Aran Islands by J.M. Synge adapted by Joe O'Byrne

Rating: ★★★★★

Between 1898 and 1902 playwright J.M. Synge spent much of his time on The Aran Islands, following the advice of W.B. Yeats to go live among the islanders and 'express a life that has never found expression.' In this grey, sea battered landscape full of mist and wild rain, where hearth is home and storytellers regale with tales by the fire, Synge was to find inspiration for many of his later works including 'Playboy of the Western World.' His experiences of living out west on the remote islands were captured in a series of journals eventually published in 1907. Adapted by writer and director Joe O'Byrne, Synge's journals come to life in Co-Motion Media's production 'The Aran Islands,' which returns after a hugely successful run in 2015 with a towering, one-man performance, but one that slightly overstays its welcome.

O'Byrne's thoughtful adaptation remains faithful, for the most part, to Synge's original material, capturing and conveying the spirit and life of the islanders. Following the aspiring writer as he

immerses himself in the island's uncivilised landscape founded on two languages, steeped in ancient loyalties and folklore, Synge's is regaled by stories of fairies, of the faithful Lady O'Connor and the faithless wife of the dead man, stories with counterparts told throughout the civilised world. The islanders themselves, with their soul deep keening, telling time through an open door and their doomed wrestling with the sea resonate deeply with Synge who gradually becomes a storyteller in his own right. Imbued with a rich romanticism, O'Byrne's 'The Aran Islands' recreates a time lost in the mists of memory, a time when the islands were already changing and brings it to life with all its tragedy, comedy and mystery.

Margaret Nolan's atmospheric set design strives less for the literal and more for the archetypal, cleverly suggesting something akin to a dimly, fire lit cave with a single entrance, replete with sails and fishing tackle. O'Byrne's lighting design attempts to echo this, being extremely successful at times, but often lighting is not all it might have been with positioning needing to be tighter in places. Kieran Duddy's musical theme, though not always ideally placed, captured something of the haunting wistfulness and deep memory lying at the heart of 'The Aran Islands,' but the accompanying soundscape was not as successful, with the sound of waves resembling white noise most of the time. Marie Tierney's costume perfectly captured the sense of an old world islander, perfectly complimenting an astonishing performance by Brendan Conroy. Switching effortlessly between characters, Conroy's compelling performance excavated the depth and richness lying at the heart of Synge's words, digging deep into the heart of its stories and characters, with wonderful vocal and physical prowess.

But even Conroy's impeccable performance couldn't mitigate 'The Aran Islands' length. At just under two hours, even with a fifteen minute intermission it demanded just a little too much towards the end and interest swiftly began to wane as patience was tested. With a little prudent pruning this could easily have been avoided and should have been. For O'Byrne's adaptation of 'The Aran Islands' shows an intelligent mind at work, one capable of successfully realising a haunting and powerful experience built around an incredible performance. For when Conroy lets loose, like the sea surrounded islanders themselves, he is a force of nature to behold and alone is more than worth the price of admittance. Not quite a four star production, but certainly a four star performance.

'The Aran Islands' by J.M. Synge, adapted by Joe O'Byrne and produced by Co-Motion Media, runs at The Viking Theatre, Clontarf, until January 23rd before going on national tour. Show begins 8.00 p.m. Tickets €12.00

For further information visit [The Viking Theatre](#)

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