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Dublin Theatre Festival 2015: an incredibly busy 'Shibboleth'

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Shibboleth by Stacey Gregg
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Shibboleth by Stacey Gregg

Rating: ★★★★☆

In modern Belfast you can take the men out of the Troubles, but you can't seem to take the Troubles out of the men. The divide between Them-ens and Us-ens is still as strong despite the peace process. Peace Walls, or residential barriers, are springing up at a steady rate to separate the wary parties, and integrated schools are treated with suspicion. Polish immigrants stealing jobs on the building site creating yet another divide. If the victors write history, history is often misremembered in the absence of an outright victor and reconciliation is still a long way off. Especially when men will always be men, ogling topless page three models and ready to turn to drink or violence if needed. In Stacey Gregg's latest play "Shibboleth," Obama's declaration that "hope is contagious" and the "world is watching" seems far away from Belfast as the money generating process seems more prominent than the peace. Funny, frenetic and often extremely

insightful, "Shibboleth" tries cover all the bases in an ambitious production. But though it has some fine moments and strong performances, ultimately it tries a little too hard to do it all.

In "Shibboleth," referring to an outmoded custom, principle or belief distinguishing one group from another, four builders raise peace walls as well as negotiating family life and the new normal of peace in Belfast. Into the mix Yuri arrives, a Polish immigrant upsetting the uneasy loyalties. Work is halted upon the discovery of a name carved on an old stone, possibly the burial site of a fallen hero, traitor or victim of the Troubles. Tensions arise when Yuri's daughter Agnieszka's relationship with her Irish boyfriend takes a troubling turn. With loyalties tested and new alliances established will men always do what men always do?

Like its characters, and post peace Belfast, "Shibboleth" suffers from something of an identity crisis. Naturalistic performances meet the highly theatrical meet warped cabaret, but "Shibboleth's" disparate ingredients rarely achieve a synergy. Rather they look cramped and clunkily fit together, perhaps a statement on the North's current condition, fighting for room in the limited space. Occasions where a symbiosis is achieved, as in the wonderful rendition of Edwyn Collin's, "Never Met A Girl Like You Before," or when the cast refer directly to the play script, are ingeniously handled and incredibly effective. Obvious metaphors abound throughout and especially weaken the final image, which shied away from the original ending contained in the written script gone to print before the end of rehearsals.

Hamish Pine's direction co-ordinates this vast array of busyness and elicits some fine performances. Piotr Baumann, Rhys Dunlop, Andy Kelleher, Vincent Higgins and Conor MacNeill as men's men on a building site were always engaging. Sophie Harkness, Louise Mathews, Kerri Quinn and vocalist Cara Robinson were equally strong. Paul Keogan's set and lighting design was a masterclass in precision, maximizing the small space to full effect with the wall being particularly well crafted.

Theatrically "Shibboleth" suffers from its own cleverness at times, appearing far too cramped and far too busy. But it still has a lot to say on the current state of the peace process, and quite a lot to say on masculinity. In not taking itself too seriously it is often funny and engaging, and in doing so brings a fresh perspective to the body of work about the North, the Troubles and the Peace process.

"Shibboleth" by Stacey Gregg, runs at [The Abbey Theatre](#) on the Peacock Stage as part of the [Dublin Theatre Festival](#) until Oct 10th, then continues its run until Oct 31st

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

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