

"Moonshine" – Thurrock Festival Performance – Weds 9th June 2010.

Adjudicator: Russell Whiteley

Adjudicator's summary:

It's a beautifully written and structured piece, it really is. I don't usually go round name-dropping, but I actually do know Jim Nolan...[RUSSELL THEN SPOKE A LITTLE ABOUT ONE OF JIM'S PLAYS CALLED 'THE SALVAGE SHOP']...he's a lovely, lovely man...very sensitive – as is obvious from the production.

It's very funny, of course, but at the same time it's poignant and it's sensitive in its exploration of the characters. They're each looking for their own resurrections. That's what actually links them together and it's important to get that balance right. On another level it's so heart-breakingly strong and yet we do need a little bit of relief every now and then just to break the tension – we can only take so much.

The episodic nature of the piece is a problem, but I think you pretty well conquered that tonight. The characters have to be very very sympathetic. You can't go for stereotypes, you've got to go for truth and credibility otherwise this play won't work. A very challenging piece underpinned by this strong, emotional motivation. By God, you explored it beautifully, I thought.

I loved the Irish music at the beginning, transporting us over the water. A juxtaposition, in fact, in some ways, for what is yet to come...

...the interval music...Enya...beautifully atmospheric, I thought.

The wonderful setting. The stained-glass window – an absolute delight, it really was...the organ...everything there...and it didn't matter that it was always on stage because we accept it...except the scene where you closed the traverse...and the use of the isolated spot, I thought worked very very well. We got used to the style after the first couple of scenes, so that was fine – we just accepted it.

The music to cover the scene change between Act 1 Scenes 1 and 2...the train noise...just enough to suggest the beach with the (boat) over there. I thought the light level was a little bit low...just needed lifting a little bit more...and we were able to suspend our belief so that was fine.

The set changes were very very efficient. I love the little touches; the poster on the coffin lid, I thought was a lovely idea. In Scene 4 when you crash the desk and the coffin...you've got very little wing space I realise that here...but I would have crashed the desk stage right and the crashed the coffin stage left – or t'other way round – rather than taking them off the same way.

Act 2 – I loved the costumes, I thought they were absolutely right. The way that Michael kept his jeans on under his costume and Griffin was there with his damn great boots on...super...

The backdrop, I thought, was fabulous. The wall costume worked extremely well, and the explosions, the collapse of the set, all worked very very well...very well engineered.

Act 2 Scene 2 – I thought the background – the ('Air on a G String') was a wonderful background to that particular scene and the breathing of the body – very well masked...

RUSSELL :(TO JANE) Did you have something over your tum?"

JANE: No, I didn't.

RUSSELL: Didn't you? You just held your breath for twenty minutes! [MUCH LAUGHTER FROM THE AUDIENCE] I kept looking for the breathing! It was great....I just thought you had something over your tum...

The lovely (music) going into the next scene...all moving together beautifully...I thought you coped extremely well...

I would imagine – I don't know – because I didn't see the original production – I would imagine they had a big composite set, but I've no idea...

The accents, just enough, I thought...just enough...I was talking about this earlier in the week about american accents...just getting the lilt right...and it worked, it worked very very well indeed.

Another thing I was impressed about with the direction of this piece – and I talked about this earlier – is that they explored the shape of the writing. You knew when to lift it and when to take it down. You kept us interested all the time – it never became monotonous, it never became 'samey' – which sometimes can happen with productions.

I loved the attack at the opening. The 'Faith Of Our Fathers', I thought was a beautiful, beautiful moment and then the hesitancy after Langton came in. The scene between McKeever and Langton sparked well and got the information over very clearly. That's a difficult scene because all you're doing is giving us background information and I thought they brought that over without boring us to death.

Lovely urging in Scene 2. That very early sensitive kiss between Michael and Bridget and then broke the mood beautifully with Griffin when he came on...that brooding, nasty piece of work. But I warmed to him, I warmed to him.

There was a warm sensitivity about the opening of Scene 3. I liked the other thing this director did – he used distance on stage. Very often actors are frightened of working too far away from each other, but there are times in this play when you don't want to bring your actors together because there's so much between them that they can't reconcile, they can't cope with....and you used distance beautifully. You also used backs very very effectively on stage. Then you just brought Elizabeth and Langton together on the 'sorry' section – but not too close – they're not ready for it yet. Despite the slight aloofness, there was a sense of connection between Langton and his daughter. I thought you handled that very very sensitively indeed.

Picked it up in Scene 4 beautifully as a contrast to the previous scene. Just had enough of the vamp from Bridget. She didn't overplay it. We could feel the yearning. You didn't overplay the suspicion of lust from Mac either when he watched her getting undressed – that could have been embarrassing – and you did just enough. We knew exactly where you were looking.

I loved the cat and mouse game that then ensued...nicely over-the-top, almost presaging what was to come later as they got up on stage. Slight air of desperation, I think, from Mac as he tries to organise the rehearsal and then broken beautifully by the Griffin section. So here again you took us on a high and then you brought us back down to earth again.

Scene 5 – the last scene of Act 1. I thought – despite the hesitancy and distance between the two of them – we could feel there was a chemistry between Mac and Elizabeth. You know, it's dying down a bit but it's still there under the surface. This again, I thought, the very very effective use of actors' backs and distance between them. There was a yearning there which I thought was beautifully handled...very emotional explosion... lots of burnt bridges have gone on between these two and it left Mac quite devastated at the end. I thought you explored all the emotional nuances within that scene extremely well.

Picked up well on the request for the chapel – the pleading of Mac...for God's sake!...you know...and swept to the end leaving us going out for our cups of coffee or whatever, wanting more. And I really wanted to see what was going to happen.

And then Scene 1 of Act 2...you know we've had all this emotional stuff going on..... My advice to you after seeing that rehearsal is 'don't give up your day jobs!'...for God's sake ☺

You could really feel the panic as the thing went through, and of course it had to be 'Greensleeves'! ☺ If anybody else use 'Greensleeves' in a Shakespeare production, I'll throttle 'em! ☺

The death of Pyramus and Thisby really was an absolute delight and then after all of the laughing...laughing our heads off...suddenly there was Michael...that rocking...so distressful. It really got to me. You handled that beautifully...you didn't overplay it. It was a while before we actually noticed what was going on over there and then into his performance...and then from that into total collapse – handled beautifully by that young actor and then the tension towards the end of that scene between Bridget and Elizabeth...understated, but beautifully played.

Strong, emotional vibrations came later between Mac and Elizabeth and there was that lovely moment of tenderness contrasted successfully between the row which eventually broke between Mac and Langton, and that final image in the pulpit.

Scene 2 – the confession scene from Mac – beautifully handled and then the understated scene between Mac and Michael when Michael comes back to say sorry. Again, beautifully handled.

The next scene again we had this use of distance. This time it's Elizabeth and her father, y'know, how are they going to become reconciled? They're desperate to close the gap and they did manage it...albeit temporarily towards the end. They took us on a very very strong, emotional journey in that particular scene, I thought.

Scene 4 – that revelation about Griffin, I thought, very sensitively handled indeed and then the gentle let down of Bridget and the almost coming together of Mac and Elizabeth. Is it going to happen? Isn't it going to happen? It didn't quite get there which was exactly right.

And then you drew all the strands together in Scene 5 beautifully and very sensitively as you wound the thing down.

A lot to admire in this production. Sorry to take you through it like this, but when you've enjoyed something I think it's important to be able to analyse not just that it was good, but why it was good.

And it was sheer attention to detail. The attention to the shape within the writing and the piece.

Some very very strong performances. It was a beautiful piece of ensemble work.

McKeever – splendid attack all the way through, but able – every now and then – just to take it down from time to time. The enthusiasm came through. There was a charm about him. I could really believe that this man had had an affair with Elizabeth when she was younger. Other productions of this that I've seen, Mac's been played quite a bit older – and balding – there's a reference, isn't there to his bald head in the text which obviously you've cut – but this McKeever actually made sense to me. There was almost at times a childlike quality to the performance which explains, I think – and very cleverly – his inability to accept the responsibility. I'm sure that is what actually underpinned the character. The story of the princess was beautifully handled – underpinned with longing. And again in Act 2, his inability

to commit came through strongly. He drove the dialogue along skilfully and explored the various troubled and confused emotions of the character very sensitively. I thought it was a delightful performance.

Michael – very very impressed with this young man. That delicious trembling opening that we got – the instability of the lad. He hovered beautifully at the beginning. Very sensitive reactions to the barbs that were fired at him. He's obviously been the butt of jokes for years and years and years and he's just lost in his own little world. You brought that over most convincingly I thought in the rehearsal. I felt the underlying distress from this lad in the scene in the embalming studio. There was a great tenderness about this young man's performance. It was mature and very very creative – no question about that at all.

Langton – carrying this awful sadness around with him. The tenderness with Elizabeth at times was lovely, but there was often confusion from this man – his lack of faith really troubling him. His face was a delight as he struggled to come to terms with all that the world seems to have thrown at him. And he was one of these actors who you could see thinking; he communicated his thought patterns to us very successfully.

Bridget – lovely attack again from Bridget. Pouted nicely when necessary – great energy. I loved the overplaying of certain sections and then you were able to pull them back. The posing at the beginning of the rehearsal was absolutely delightful. There was a lovely immaturity about the character. We could see her coming to terms with her feelings – the confusion was often very delightfully communicated. There was a great strength to this performance. She wasn't just a love-lorn lass, there was something deep down inside her which was dying to come out.

Griffin – God! ☺ Very unpleasant moments there. Almost an air of menace about him. He looks as rough as a bear's whatsit! ☺ Often there was a simmering anger running through the performance. And again in many ways very much like Michael – another lost soul – pathetic and inadequate, confused and basically very very lonely. I thought after that scene with Mac, when we'd heard about his relationship with the German guy – I really started to feel desperately sorry for him and could understand what had driven him earlier on in the performance. I thought it was a very clever, very well crafted performance.

Elizabeth – gorgeous poise from this girl. And she was almost on an emotional rollercoaster. It was again, it was one of those performances when what wasn't said was sometimes just as important as what she was actually saying. She shared with the audience...she shared her distress, her confusion, her sadness and her indecision, and we went through this rollercoaster with her on stage. I thought a very very skillful, very understated performance.

Margaret Langton – Super! Hardly got a line wrong! ☺

It was a sympathetic production which explored the highs and lows of the writing, I thought with great skill. The actors had obviously – and the director – explored the characters and all their emotional baggage with great sensitivity...and explored the themes in the play – explored the various themes of love and its ramifications with great depth and positivity. I really believed...I really believed them because of their truth in performance. You took us securely on a creative emotional journey, at times very funny and at others full of yearning and despair which interpreted Jim Nolan's script, I thought, very very faithfully. He would have been chuffed to death with this performance. Thank you very very much indeed!