

The Cripple of Inishmaan at Bovingdon Memorial Hall

5:11pm Thursday 2nd April 2009

The Bovingdon Players took on this extraordinary play with confidence, delight and a momentum fuelled by an apparent ability to work faultlessly together.

Set on the Irish Isles of Aran in the 1930s, *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, Martin McDonagh's powerfully moving black comedy focuses on the stark poverty and insularity of a fictitious, isolated, ill-educated local community. Woven into the story is the real event of the making of Robert Flaherty's 1930s documentary film, *Man of Aran* and its potent effects on the island's misfit inhabitants.

Jean Fiori-McPhee's scenic painting, with bare lines and muted pale blues and beiges, created with minimal simplicity the cogent atmosphere of the coastal village. Much of the action occurs in the village shop, necessarily depicted as a sparse, almost empty place stocked only, it seemed, with tins of peas, the occasional egg and a small collection of sweets.

The shop, indeed, set the scene for the most powerful aspect of this play, the comic and repetitive dialogue. Cripple Billy's two adopted aunts, Kate and Eileen, played so endearingly by Nicky Woodward and Liz Lewis, demonstrated that neither the action nor the dialogue could be hurried along. In marvellously sustained Irish accents they seemed to generate spontaneous rather than rehearsed conversations; words whose monumental absence of significance and clever use of timing could have come straight from *Waiting for Godot*, and yet whose every lilt and cadence was mesmerising. The audience was drawn in by the settled and repetitive nature of their relationship, which one sensed to be the enduring heart of their simple way of life.

Cripple Billy Claven, the central character, was played by Sean Chalkwright with a touching vulnerability. Clearly isolated by his ability to both read and think, Billy was the butt of village ignorance and impatience, a hapless loner who stared at cows and pined gently but futilely for the equally vulnerable, vicious Slippery Helen, and who was frequently mocked and hit about the head, as if the cruelty of his physical handicap was not enough. Sean Chalkwright carried all this, and the physical difficulty of maintaining Billy's deformity, with impressive conviction, showing a willingness to fight back which never detracted from his quiet self-understanding; here was a boy who hadn't given up on hope, despite the casual cruelty and habitual dismissal he encountered.

Billy's story is both generated and eventually resolved by the village news monger-gossip, Johnnypateenmike, marvellously played by the fulsome figure of Jeff Prestedge, perpetually badgering his neighbours for crumbs of gossip and on the scrounge for hand-outs, apparently without any scruples which might modify his behaviour. Indeed, he is portrayed as trying to get his mother to drink herself to death – "I want this bottle down you by tea time" – and therein lay one of the most hilarious scenes of the play. If dark comedy hanging on the edge of farce can be exquisitely played, the bed scene was it. Barbara Bonney as Mammy was the funniest thing I have seen in a long time. Sitting up in bed clutching her bottle, with her night cap and straggling hair (toothless yet decidedly endearing), and hurling insults at her son as he hurled them back at her, with the ineffectual doctor on one side and her rapacious son, Johnnypateen on the other, this was the epitome of dynamic timing in sheer, engaging, outrageous comedy.

It is Johnnypateenmike who brings the news to Inishmaan of a film crew operating on the neighbouring island of Inishmore, which leads Billy to make his bid for escape. In the face of everybody's automatic opposition he persuades a local

fisherman, Babbybobby Bennett, to take him across to the filming, and from there he disappears to America for a screen test. The grief of the two aunts is heart breaking and they are left bewildered, the one talking to a stone for company, the other guzzling yalla-mallows to survive, both lost in the dislocating emptiness of Billy's absence.

Billy is gone for some time, but the gap was more than adequately filled by Sam Street as Bartley McCormick, a simple, sweetie-loving, telescope-loving village boy and the annoying younger brother of 'Slippy' Helen, so named for her propensity to break rather than sell the eggs she's in charge of. She has learned her vindictiveness in self-defence, and doesn't hesitate to pinch, punch or peg eggs at her cowering brother or insult or attack any man who shows signs of trespassing too far, the local priest included. Sam Street as Bartley and Jessica Bailey-Woodward as Helen carried off these two contrasting characters with great humour, understanding and attention to detail. And Iain King's rather gracious, well-spoken Doctor McSharry, he of the nimble fingers who repairs the ravages wrought by the villagers on each other, provided a sanely welcome contrast to the crude, impetuous, illogical actions of Helen and others.

What has happened to Billy, one wonders. Surely his bid for fame and fortune will come to no good? And there he is again, in a stark, chillingly bleak rooming-house in New York, sick, longing for his parents and apparently dying, and then, we think, dead. This, just as he had come back into the action, was a nasty shock, which I imagine McDonagh intended and which I at least resented. It was, therefore, a relief to find Billy emerging a little later back in the village, where he is welcomed as ever with endearments in the form of cuffs, shouts and beatings.

The thread of Billy's story and the mysterious death by drowning of his parents when he was a small baby, and his longing to know what really had happened to them, are woven in and out of the action and eventually resolved by Johnnypateenmike and the aunts. But in a more horrific way than is told to Billy, whose longing to know if they loved him, despite his deformities, is also woven with pathos and passion throughout the play.

Billy got the likeable Babbybobby (strongly and intelligently played by Conan McPhee) to take him in his boat by saying that he had only three months to live, and the fact that his lies become truth is a bitter twist in the end of a series of redemptions that seem to point to a happy ending. Even the deliciously awful Johnny is shown in an unexpectedly better light, and the vicious Helen relents in her mockery of Billy and agrees to walk out with him, albeit in the dark. The aunts are returned to normal life when they get their Billy back; but little do they know.

The poignant frailty of the characters – "there are plenty round here just as crippled as me, only it isn't on the outside it shows!" – the wicked humour, the poetic eloquence, tempo and lilt of the dialogue, make this an extraordinary and delightful play, and one driven by dialogue rather than plot. The visual empathy of the settings, the captivating music chosen to underpin the mood, the exceptional characterization and technical excellence of the team transformed it into a production of considerable merit. I think only a fully cohesive cast, as this was, could have produced such delight; the sense of enjoyment they felt at working together being almost palpable. Their director, Stewart Woodward, seemed to have ruthlessly honed the performance to this level of perception and sensitivity, yet steered his actors with a light touch to do wonderful justice to this play.

The design and tricky manipulation of generous sets was ably carried out by Mike Aylward and his backstage crew. The gently understated, rural Irish period costume was by Jan Burrows, with suffused lighting by Tony Sidell.

Carolyn Keer