



The Call by Tara Maria Lovett, Peri-Talking at The Crypt

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Arriving to watch Tara Maria Lovett's *The Call*, we realise that we have entered a human body. The room pulses with red lighting as we take our seats around a ribcage, a pile of stones at its centre representing a heart. The owner of this body, Maddie – played by Emma Coolahan – emerges and, prompted by a mysterious 'voice' played by Declan Mills, she describes how her heart has been turned to stone. Taking us from her childhood to young adulthood in a series of vignettes, Maddie explains how she has struggled to understand herself and her relationships with a number of different men, all performed very entertainingly by Michael FitzGerald.

The paralysis being dramatised is not so much one of the heart as the mouth: we are not witnessing the development of Maddie's sexuality, but her ability to articulate it to herself. Sexuality and desire are the play's main subjects, but they are never spoken about directly, instead represented in code, analogy – and silence. We begin with the romantic declarations of Scarlett and Rhett in *Gone With The Wind* and, in a disturbingly funny scene, with the man who sexually abuses Maddie, promising to take her horse-riding, but first making her 'practise', sitting on his knee. As a teenager, Maddie observes her teacher's struggles to name the parts of the female body, displayed before her on a wallchart; and in adulthood, she wrestles with the unspeaking insistence of a soldier and the inarticulate banalities of a dope-smoking hippy from Dunshaughlin. The play's conclusion appears to be that Maddie's ability to express herself as a sexual person might be based in her spirituality. This suggestion comes from her dialogue with 'The Voice' – which, intriguingly, is the voice of a man.

Lovett is dealing with some very big issues here – sexuality, spirituality and gender – and it's encouraging that she faces all of their contradictions and complexities. While it is usual for Irish writers to mockingly tackle the issue of sexual suppression as a by-product of Catholic guilt, Lovett's character is witty and likeable, desperate to protect herself, and in pain from her inability to express her desires. Importantly, although this play is based mainly in the monologue form, it is extremely *carnal*. The audience, after all, is in a human body, and our attention is consistently turned to the physical. The beating of a heart represented by two stones being thrust together, the movement of the actors – even the heat of the Crypt itself – mean that we are made as aware of the body as the spirit by this play. The monologue form is very common in Irish drama, but Lovett's use of it in so physical a manner draws attention to the disembodied nature of that form as it is used on the Irish stage, implying that if Ireland has become a secular society, it is not yet comfortably a sexualised society.

All of this is great – but, of course, it's a lot to squeeze into 75 minutes, and it seemed that Maddie's struggle to articulate herself was partially a dramatisation of the author's struggle to express herself in the theatrical form. Lovett seems to know what she's good at – her language is poetic but for the most part well controlled, and for a

writer so obviously interested in words and ideas, she seems alert to the visual element of theatre. She also has a strong sense of comedy. But she doesn't seem to know exactly what she wants to say, and so the play suffered from occasional incoherency. I left the Crypt with admiration for Lovett's achievement, but with a sense that she now needs to refine her style of writing – and perhaps to simplify it.

Emma Coolahan has impressed recently in supporting roles in *En Suite* and *Midden*, so it was interesting to see her take a leading role, which she filled very well. If we manage to sympathise with the play's mostly unlikeable male characters, this is due mainly to the charismatic acting of Michael FitzGerald. Declan Mills, who played The Voice, did a good job with the play's least successful role. The production design by Sonia Haccius was excellent, so appropriate to the cavernous space of The Crypt that it was hard to imagine the play being performed anywhere else. And David Horan certainly deserves credit for bringing all of these elements together. This is the work of a promising writer – and if that's something of a backhanded compliment, implying that her work is in some ways imperfect, it's also meant positively: *The Call* may not be entirely successful, but it's hard to fault a production that does so many difficult things well.

