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Faith Healer by Brian Friel, Gate Theatre

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Faith Healer



Ingrid Craigie as Grace in 'Faith Healer'. Photo: Anthony Woods

by **Patrick Lonergan** Reviewed 05 February

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During the last decade, Owen Roe has emerged as one of Ireland's very best actors – yet, until now, he's rarely filled a major leading role. His performance as the Irishman in Ben Barnes's 2001 *Gigli Concert* was astonishing precisely because it was so well matched by Mark Lambert in the role of JPW King. Likewise, his work as Petruchio in the 2006 Rough Magic *Taming of the Shrew* was memorable because it was so thoroughly complemented by Pauline McLynne's Katherina. Roe, in other words, is the kind of actor one could build a company around: he excels when he works with others – mirroring them, reacting to them, listening to them. Some actors are so great that they can make others seem mediocre by comparison. Roe is great because he allows everyone around him to seem excellent.

For that reason, he is not an obvious candidate to play Frank Hardy – not in the same way that Donal McCann, Barry McGovern, and Ralph Fiennes have all done. Those actors are very different from each other, but each has the qualities needed to convey Frank's essential traits: his aloofness and self-centredness, the mad charisma that inspires Grace and Teddy to follow him around for years, and his anger with himself for having a talent that he can neither control nor understand.

What we get from Roe is a very different Frank, one who is much more vulnerable and less powerful than any we've seen

before. As Frank's monologue develops, his assurance quickly disappears: he stammers and his voice breaks, and at times he sways – almost like a boxer who's taken too many heavy punches. His recitation of placenames is no longer an incantation, but seems instead to be an obsessive plea for relief from his memories. And his final speech is delivered not with the assurance of a tragic hero meeting his fate, but with the grimace of a weak man who knows he's about to experience a long anticipated reckoning. This characterisation seems occasionally at odds with some of Friel's stage directions – yet it works surprisingly well, as soon becomes evident when the other two actors join the action.

Ingrid Craigie's performance as Grace is also very different from any I've seen before, including her own in the same role in Jonathan Kent's 2006 Gate production. In that version, Grace seemed weak and hesitant: her statement at the end of her monologue that she is one of "Frank's fictions" seemed more like an acceptance of her own inferiority than a devastating revelation of a truth she's been trying to avoid for years. Here, we get a much stronger – and therefore more credible – Grace.

The starting point for Craigie's characterisation seems to have been a description in Teddy's monologue of Grace singing a song in the pub in Ballybeg. She does so "not as if she's performing but more as if the song's just sort of rising out of her by itself", says Teddy. That's exactly what happens here: standing with her legs firmly planted on the stage, Craigie seems like a lightning rod, delivering Friel's words as if they have a power entirely of their own. This gives Grace an intensity that makes her seem much stronger than Roe's Frank, and which adds emotional force to the play in a way that enriches it considerably.

This emotional force in turn changes our response to Teddy. In that role, Kim Durham carefully balances Teddy's warmth with his sense of resignation. In doing so, he shows that Teddy is an essentially likeable man, but that he's also disillusioned and somewhat cynical. So although we'll still find Teddy funny, our laughter now is bittersweet. That's important for our full appreciation of the play: Teddy is so charismatic that he can actually make us forget about Grace and Frank, so Durham's restraint here serves the play well.

What this *Faith Healer* involves, then, is a shift in the balance of power. In earlier productions, we formed the sense that Grace and Teddy were dependent on Frank – that they were indeed his fictions, and that his death has deprived their lives of meaning. Here, it seems instead that Grace and Teddy are much more in control, that they stay with Frank because they know he can't survive alone. They have both accepted that their task in life is to sustain Frank's fictions about himself – so his power over them is only an example of the tyranny of the weak over the strong. Suddenly, *Faith Healer* has stopped being a tragedy about one person, and has instead become a tragedy about all three characters.

The coherence of this vision must be credited to the director, Michael Colgan. He adds some great touches. I loved the decision to leave Frank briefly on stage at the beginning of Grace's monologue: as he stands stage left with his arm aloft, shrouded in coat and hat, Roe creates a visual echo of the mute auditor from Beckett's *Not I* (a text that certainly bears comparison to *Faith Healer*). And, whereas the 2006 production of the play aimed to dazzle the audience with its speedy set changes and celebrity casting, Colgan instead gives us a grotty simplicity that brings the play into much sharper focus.

This, then, is not simply a revival of the Ralph Fiennes *Faith Healer* from a few years ago. It is an entirely new production that sheds new light on the play: it is surprising, engrossing, and genuinely innovative. And to a great extent, it succeeds because of Roe's generosity: not because he steals the show but, on the contrary, because he allows Craigie and Durham to freedom to dominate.

Patrick Lonergan lectures in Drama at NUI Galway. He is the author of Theatre and Globalization: Irish Drama in the Celtic Tiger era (Palgrave).

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Faith Healer by Brian Friel

27 January - 20 February

Produced by **Gate Theatre**

In **Gate Theatre**

Directed by Michael Colgan

Designer: Paul O'Mahony

Lighting: James McConnell

Music: Denis Clohessy

With: Ingrid Craigie, Kim Durham, Owen Roe

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