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The Ballymun Trilogy

By Dermot Bolger

New Island.

300 pp. €16.99

One of the most unusual features of theatre in this country is that, when audiences watch Irish plays, they often do so from an outsider's perspective. We recognise that what we're watching is part of our national dramatic tradition – yet the characters on stage will usually be very different from the audience: they often speak differently, occupy a different social class, and live in places that the audience will only barely be familiar with. The classic example of this phenomenon is Sean O'Casey's *Dublin Trilogy*, which was set in the immediate environment of the Abbey – but which dramatised the lives of people who (in most cases) would never have set foot in that theatre. And something similar might be said of the work of Martin McDonagh, Marina Carr, and many others.

Dermot Bolger's *Ballymun Trilogy* breaks from that tradition in at least one important way. Originally produced between 2004 and 2008 at the Axis in Ballymun, his *Trilogy* was written for an audience of insiders: the community on stage is also the community watching the plays. Bolger therefore can't romanticise the setting, and he won't exaggerate its negative qualities either. Instead, he aims to do something quite unusual within Irish drama: to bear witness to a community's life over fifty years, as it's been experienced by a variety of ordinary individuals.

Each of the plays can be enjoyed on its own merits but, by publishing them as a trilogy, Bolger allows their shared patterns and preoccupations to emerge. The most prominent of these is his use of familial relationships to explore the development of the entire community. The first play, for example, shows how the birth of a child allows a family to recover their sense of hope in terrible circumstances. They'd believed that moving to Ballymun would vastly improve their lives, but were confronted with the problems that afflicted all of their neighbours: lifts and a heating system that never worked properly, mass unemployment and drug abuse – and the indifference of the political system that had created these problems.

Similarly, the final play uses the funeral of an old man as a way of mourning the demolition of the Towers themselves. By linking such personal stories with the broader social context, Bolger suggests that we can't move confidently into the future until we come to terms with our origins – a maxim that is just as true for individuals as it is for communities.

His interest, then, is not in telling one story but in allowing a multiplicity of experiences to be shared. His characters often address the audience directly, and the performers frequently remain on stage when they're not in character, acting as an "internal audience" for the action. That dual emphasis – on testimony and the act of listening – places the experience of the individual at the heart of the plays, and ensures that no single version of the truth is allowed to dominate. This seems an

important way to write about a community that has often been spoken about, but rarely been listened to.

As always, Bolger is interested in broad themes: emigration and the impact of Catholicism on sexual morality feature strongly, for instance. But the most impressive feature of *The Ballymun Trilogy* is his willingness to blend honesty with optimism. “There’s always been two ways to look at Ballymun,” says one of his characters: it can be seen as “an unmitigated disaster or the scene of thousands of daily unseen victories”. Bolger dedicates equal attention to both aspects of the locale. He shows how many “unmitigated disasters” could have been avoided, and argues that they mustn’t be repeated. Yet he also makes visible the many “unseen victories” that those disasters have overshadowed for far too long.

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