

British Theatre Guide

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Faith Healer

Brian Friel
Almeida, King's Cross
(2001)

The Almeida has had some excellent productions since its move to a temporary home in the red light district of Kings Cross. Jonathan Kent's revival of Brian Friel's 1979 play is destined to follow *The Shape of Things* as a major commercial and artistic success. The play itself is excellent and the performances from the three actors are all exceptional. Not only is their timing perfect but also both facial expressions and body language add immeasurably to the effect.

This play consists of monologues given by the Fantastic Francis Hardy, the eponymous faith healer, his wife Grace and his manager, Teddy. The set almost goes beyond the minimalist, as within a very large space painted black, there is little or nothing. With a chair or two and a piece of carpet, the seedy lives lived by this trio are conjured up.

With this play, it is clear that Brian Friel has been a major influence on today's supreme Irish monologist, Conor McPherson. At times, it was very reminiscent of *The Weir*. As the play develops, we see that the tale that we originally hear from Frank is not the same as that related by either his wife or his manager. They talk about the same times and the same places but their recollections are very different. This search for the truth is one of Friel's main themes.

Each of the actors is excellent. Ken Stott, looking like a slightly past it Irish front row forward, tells his tale in a very understated, relaxed Irish style. He really has a gift but unfortunately, does not have the ability to turn it on and off at will. This means that on occasions, he will seem like a true faith healer while much of the time he appears to be no more than the charlatan that people would normally expect. At his best, on a night in Wales he cured ten people in as many minutes. This was a highlight while we also learn of the desperate lows.

Geraldine James as a desperately pained and loving Grace repeats the stories of love and hate, success and failure with a different slant. It is she who explains how, soon after qualifying as a solicitor she ran off from her family with her "mountebank". She desperately loves him and can forgive him almost anything. Their life on the road together for twenty years was anything but fun but she seems to have few regrets.

After seeing two anxious drunks, it is almost a relief to see Ian McDiarmid playing the shabby impresario, Teddy who regards himself as a type of show business philosopher. At least he is a little more cheerful as he downs five or six bottles of Bass in half-an-hour. Rather like Patrick Marber's Howard Katz, this manager is a failed comedian who will do anything up to promote his acts. It is very noticeable that all three characters regard Frank Hardy as a performer rather than a medicine man. Ian McDiarmid gives a particularly touching performance which reaches its height as Teddy dissolves into an impotent, shaking rage at the injustice of life.

The final, short scene returns to Ken Stott who reduces the audience to an eerie silence as, under Mark Henderson's subtle lighting he builds up to a shocking finale as all three characters seek peace in different ways.

It is rare to see a series of monologues performed on a large stage. Friel gets away with it comfortably thanks to his deeply lyrical and poetic use of language which allows him to paint beautiful verbal pictures. There seems little doubt that the mesmerising performances by all three of these actors will lead to awards galore and anyone who can get a ticket should do so before they sell out.

This review originally appeared on Theatreworld in a slightly different version.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)