

British Theatre Guide

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Iron

Rona Munro

Royal Court Theatre Downstairs

(2003)

Scottish actress Sandy McDade surely gives the performance of her life in Rona Munro's chilling new play. She is the lifer Fay, who has spent the last fifteen years in prison. Two years ago, the Olivier Best Actress Award went to Paola Dionisotti for a London transfer of a Traverse play. It would not be too surprising if Miss McDade followed her.

This is not to disparage the supporting performances, particularly from Louise Ludgate, considerably improved from Edinburgh, as Fay's 25 year-old daughter, Josie, who starts the play by visiting the mother that she has not seen for fifteen years. Her life is in a state of flux as she has just changed jobs, country and been divorced.

The scene is set within Anthony MacIlwaine's much cut down prison, which fits the Royal Court's smaller stage without any great loss of impact. This is an impressive achievement on the parts of both designer and director.

Relationships are a tricky thing for a life prisoner, particularly when one is manipulative like Fay. There can be close friendships with warders such as the philosophical George and single mother Sheila (played by Ged McKenna and Helen Lomax respectively) but these easily evaporate. This becomes even trickier when their happy little group is "invaded" by Josie and the balance goes awry.

At this stage, Fay is so unused to company that her reaction her daughter's arrival is like that of a trapped bird. Her head darts around and her eyes show panic as the pair reintroduce themselves. She soon realises that if nothing else, her daughter is a great source of vicarious entertainment. After a description of a trip to San Diego, she pays Josie the dubious compliment of being "better than television". Since she hasn't seen anything after the 8 o'clock watershed for fifteen years this is probably true.

While Fay is coming to terms with the arrival of a daughter that she has not seen since she entered prison for a horrific murder, Josie also has much to learn. She has no memory of the first eleven years of her life and cannot remember what her father looked like. Fay acts in many ways like a psychotherapist as she assists her daughter to recollect little bits about her past. This comes to culmination with the most horrific memory of her father, a lovely man who pushed things too far, with fatal consequences.

The revelations are searingly powerful and Chahine Yavroyan's lighting allows no escape. It is also he that has the final say as Fay is lit up by an almost saintly light as the play ends. This reflects the return to a state of equanimity as Josie is brought to realise that both she and her mother will be happier if Fay is left alone.

Where a very fine performance becomes something much more special, is when Fay is put into a punishment regime that means that she is not allowed to see Josie. She goes on to a hunger-strike and it is possible to believe that Sandy McDade has suddenly starved herself, so convincing and moving is her malnourished performance.

A play about a woman serving a life sentence does not sound like great entertainment. *Iron* may not be the most cheerful play in London, but it offers tremendous insight into the human condition and particularly into women's lives. This is also a play that offers significant comment about the nature of life imprisonment and seems even more relevant after observing the prurience that followed Myra Hindley's death.

Under Roxana Silbert's tight direction, all of the actors perform well with Miss McDade outstanding. Like all of the best drama, *Iron* resonates and will stay with the viewers long after they have left the theatre.

Iron plays to the Royal Court until 1st March.

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

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)