

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

The Beauty Queen of Leenane

Martin McDonagh

Theatre By The Lake

Theatre By The Lake, Keswick

21 October–11 November 2022

It's just happy coincidence that this revival of one of Martin McDonagh's first stage successes should open here on the same day as his latest film, *The Banshees of Inisherin*, arrived in cinemas.

Both illustrate how the master chronicler of Irish isolation is at his best when he turns his hand to two main protagonists.

The Beauty Queen may be 26 years 'older' now, but her ability to tantalise audiences with a mix of sharp comedy and blunt horror remains undimmed.

Maureen (Elizabeth Appleby) is a 40-year-old love-starved spinster locked into a lonely life in County Galway for 20 years, coping with the repetitive demands of an ailing mother Mag (Susan Twist). A glimpse of escape brings matters to a grim conclusion.

It's a distorted take on Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, but one with dark tones of Quentin Tarantino added to the flavour.

Susan Twist, a familiar face around the region's theatres, is perfectly cast as the rocking chair-bound matriarch, with a metronomic air of resentment. "An interfering old biddy" is probably the kindest thing anyone ever said about her. Equally, Elizabeth Appleby matches her in a performance bristling with rage.

As catalyst to their relationship, Pato (Cillian O Gairbhi) recites a love letter monologue at the opening of act two, which rightly earns its own round of applause.

You have to suspect his presence made the work of the production's dialect coach Natalie Grady that much easier, since you can cut the accents here with a knife.

It was a mark of the launch night audience's involvement in proceedings that there were distinct gasps, or murmurs of anxiety, at appropriate moments. It's only live theatre that can still prompt such collective reaction.

Nevertheless, the story's inevitable conclusion becomes a centre-stage tableau which leaves nothing to audience imagination—when a more constrained suggestion can often prove equally horrific.

Ray (Cameron Tharma) completes the cast as a psychotic youth harbouring his own resentments against the world, and a specific one involving a tennis ball!

Leenane's dark Beauty still exerts a fatal attraction.

Reviewer: [David Upton](#)