

THEATRE November 8, 2013

Review: The Pillowman

by **Rory MacKenzie**



Rory Mackenzie reviews this post-Halloween creep fest

Martin McDonagh's violent and mind-bending play *The Pillowman* is a challenging show by any standard. It combines the setting of a corrupt totalitarian state with the violence and beauty of fairy tales. As such it is all about the union of opposites, of laughing when you should be crying, of crying when you should be laughing. It's a neat trick and one that Alex Solheim's lean and subtle production pulls off, and then some.

Despite this the opening, it must be said, was bumpy. Some flat delivery and unconvincing aggression meant that funny jokes were not finding laughs and the chilling moments were not producing shivers. For instance, Stephen Quinn's Katurian did not seem to relish his own gruesome stories enough, but was rather embarrassed by them instead. Without this relish we lose the crucial sense of moral complicity between Katurian and the horrific content of his stories.

However, Quinn completely corrects the problem, and with gusto, during his first monologue. Here there is relish aplenty, a pure joy in all the grizzly and sadistic details. His eccentric delivery and creepy puppet play was utterly absorbing. And once Quinn reached this pitch in his performance he stayed there. The rest of his performance, which included several very long and complex monologues, was quite remarkable.

But the stand out performance must have been Akaina Ghosh who, from the moment she stepped onstage to her final death throes, was a note perfect Michal, Katurian's slower, older brother. With absolute precision she portrayed Michal's balance of childish naivety and abhorrent brutality. He is obsessed with his own itchy bum yet blasé about child murder. Ghosh's undeniable sense of humour is equally well served by her flashes of sincerity. 'You don't know how much I can take,' she tells us, in a sudden brilliant illumination of her character's hidden depths. Her scene with Quinn, which dominates the centre of the play, was pure tragicomic bliss.

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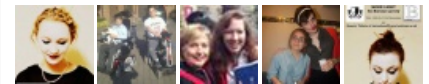
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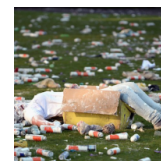
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The other two main actors were unfortunately not as strong. An overly intense Ariel (Lennart Ardeal) ironically resulted in a complete lack of tension. The frequency and proximity of his face to face screaming with Quinn was not so much uncomfortable as vaguely ridiculous. An overly expressive face also did not help the problem. Had the performance been toned down it would have worked a lot better. He was however a good deal more interesting with the end of the play.

Ariel's sympathetic turn was delicately rendered and indeed quite moving. Likewise, Eveliina Kuitunen as Tupolski seemed out of place at the beginning, not quite mustering the aggression needed, complete with a delivery that seemed to halt at odd moments. But she too was better in her last scene, particularly when Katurian insults her ability to write good titles.

The writing is fantastic, as you would expect from McDonagh, who is most famous for having written and directed *In Bruges*. The building layers of metafictional complexities, the throwaway lines that developed into grand motifs and the constant twisting and turning of the plot were all deftly handled by Solheim, who mercifully kept the directorial touches to a minimum.

Far from flawless, but ultimately fantastic. *The Pillowman* produced laughter, tears and white knuckle fear. The stuff that dreams are made of.

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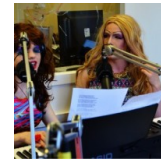
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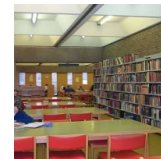
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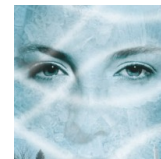
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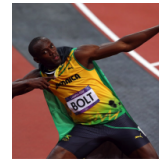
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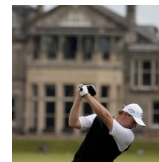
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