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West and East Village, Chelsea, Soho, Noho, Little Italy, Chinatown and Lower East
Side, Since 1933

Theater

A SHORT WAKE

Part of the 1st Irish 2009 theater festival, Sept. 10-26 (www.1stirish.com)

By Derek Murphy

Directed by Ludovica Villar-Hauser

With Peter Bradbury and Brandon Williams

A Tweiss production, September 10-26

At Manhattan Theatre Source, 177 MacDougal Street

212-352-3101 or www.theatermania.com

Photo by Michael Priest Photography



Brandon Williams, left, as Jimmy; Peter Bradbury as Teddy

“A Short Wake” not here for long

Second time a charm for 1st Irish 2009 theater fest

By Jerry Tallmer

The two brothers, Teddy and Jimmy, have not seen or talked to one another for 33 years.

Jimmy went out to California and became a hotshot lawyer. Teddy, four years older, remained in New York City where they were born and hustled his way into his 40s as a fast-talking thief and gambler.

Now their bad-tempered, abusive Irish-American ex-bookie father — the root of their separate problems, and separate memories — lies dead in his coffin, awaiting burial. Lo and behold, here comes unexpected Jimmy, all the way from California, walking through the door of the funeral parlor.

Recovering from his surprise, Teddy says: “Why don’t you go over there and say hello to Pop. He’s dying to see you.”

And if you’d like to know how that fraternal mishigas spins out, you can make your way to the Manhattan Theatre Source, where Derek Murphy’s “A Short Wake” is stirring up dark Irish waters September 10-26 as an entry in the 1st Irish 2009 theater festival.

Ireland doesn’t breed more playwrights than any other country. It just seems that way. Especially now and in New York, where that second annual 1st Irish to-do brings us the works of 21 very alive Irish or Irish-bred dramatists at 12 Off-Broadway venues, most of them in the Village, from September 1 to October 4.

That’s right — the second annual “1st Irish 2009 theater festival,” which is how they bill it, the first such charivari having been last year’s 1st Irish 2008 New York theater festival.

If you see what I mean.

It makes good sense, anyway, to Limerick-born, New York-based George Heslin, prime mover of 1st Irish both 2008 and 2009 and founder/artistic director of the Origin Theatre Company, a springboard for launching new European playwrights in America.

“It’s all about risk-taking,” says Heslin. “People send in scripts, we select and then connect them to companies here.”

Among those connections: the sparkling Irish Repertory Theatre on West 22nd Street, the busy little Manhattan Theatre Source on MacDougal Street, the Gene Frankel Theatre on Bond Street, Players Theatre and Players Loft on MacDougal Street, St. Peter’s Rectory on West 20th Street, NYU Glucksman Ireland House in Washington Mews, Vineyard Theatre on East 15th Street, and the elegant, warm-historied Players Club on Gramercy Park South.

Also the Mint Theatre, on West 43rd Street, the 59E59 Theatres on East 59th Street. Borders Bookstore on Columbus Circle, the American Irish Historical Society, and the Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center.

Some 375 actors, writers, directors, designers, stage managers, etc., are about to be involved this year.

Among the plays on this round: Sebastian Barry’s Dublin love story, “The Pride of Parnell Street”; Billy Roche’s small-town “Tales From Rainwater Pond”; Mark Doherty’s “Trad,” about some very, very old folks; Paula Meehan’s semi-autobiographical inner-city “Cell”; Dermot Bolger’s eerie post-mortem “Walking the Road”; Barbara Hammond’s Shavian-sounding “Beyond the Pale”; Conor McPherson’s tense, oft-revived “The Good Thief.”

Plus a gender special, September 2-20 at 59E59 Theatres, Origin Theater Company's presentation of "Spinning the Times," — world premieres of five short new plays by five Irish women: Geraldine Aron, Lucy Caldwell, Rosalind Haslet, Rosemary Jenkinson, Belinda McKeon.

Which brings us back to "A Short Wake" and Derek Murphy, the Dublin-born self-described offspring of "a hard-drinking electrician" father. Murphy's tormented "Wake" came out, in disguise, from an exchange of recollections he'd had three years ago with one of his three sisters. "What our memories were, and how different." (The playwright has no brothers, and that electrician father is still alive — in hospital. "A few too many cocktails," says the son.)

"I could tell ya a story," says Murphy, and then — prodded by an interviewer — tells it.

"One Sunday when we were kids our father set about taking all of us to see 'The Sound of Music' followed by a restaurant after the movie. But this one sister couldn't eat her [midday] Sunday dinner. Our mother [also still alive] was a terrible cook anyway.

"Our father flew into a rage, grabbed my sister's plate, hurled it into the garbage, and we all followed him out of the house, leaving that sister sitting there. She was still there at the kitchen table when we came back from the movie and the restaurant.

"But my father felt guilty, and the next day he took her all alone to a restaurant; for the meal she'd missed.

"Well, 20 years later I got talking with her about that incident. She said: 'Oh no, we all went to 'The Sound of Music' and that restaurant, don't you remember? It was just a lovely day.'

"Whereas I" — says the Derek Murphy of 2009 — "clearly remembered the events of the day before. It goes to show you what tricks memory can play."

Murphy came to the United States in 1985, after college, "when there wasn't much going on in Ireland and I was estranged from my father." Pause. "So I ended up married [to Martha Fioravante] and the father of two, in Staten Island."

And writing plays that burn deep — and bitterly funny — if "A Short Wake" is any guide.

(TEDDY has pulled out a gun, there in the funeral parlor, and points it first at Jimmy, then toward the casket.)

JIMMY: What are you doing, Teddy? You expecting him to wake up? Why did you bring it here?

TEDDY: I bring it everywhere, the OTB, Dunkin' Donuts, The Blarney Stone [a pub], confession, the post office.

JIMMY: Wait a minute, you go to confession?...I don't know what's more fucked up, you going to confession, or you taking a gun to confession...What are you going to do, shoot the priest if he gives you too many Hail Mary's?

TEDDY: That would be a sin...

JIMMY: You need serious help.

TEDDY: I know. That's why I go to confession. Sometimes I confess your sins.

For a full schedule of the 2009 festival plus any other information, go to www.1stirish.com. The 1 there is a numeral 1.