

Reviews for Half a Glass of Water and Farewell

The Irish Times (originally published on 5/12/2012)

IRISHTIMES.com

Saturday, December 8, 2012

•

The Irish Times - Wednesday, December 5, 2012

Farewell/Half A Glass of Water

The Playhouse, Derry

It has been 14 years since the hugely influential Field Day last staged a theatre production. That brings a further resonance to the plays chosen for this double bill by two emerging writers: both feature characters in contemporary Northern Ireland who are haunted by unfinished business.

In something like a klaxon call of recommitment to the company's output, original co-founder Stephen Rea performs in both pieces and directs one, Clare Dwyer Hogg's debut drama, Farewell. (Her second play will be staged next year, during Derry City of Culture, with other plans for a new work by Sam Shepard.)

A play in which an IRA informer takes refuge in a remote cottage in Donegal, but shares it with the ghosts of those he betrayed, Farewell seems to invite flickers of Stewart Parker's Pentecost, where conflict also persists between the living and the dead. Rea's direction, like his compellingly ruffled performance as the guilt-ridden John, gives the piece an unwavering sombreness. "We agreed you're supposed to think of me as dead," he tells his wife (Bríd Brennan), who is open to warmer negotiation.

Weighed down with exposition, heavily inscribed metaphor and occasionally overwrought dialogue, the play doesn't quite earn that sobriety, though, remaining more in thrall to the dead than the quick.

Written by the reliably controversial David Ireland, and originally commissioned by the Abbey, Half a Glass of Water features a meeting between a brutalised young man (Conor MacNeill) and his former abuser (Rea), which is somehow more subtly disturbing than David Harrower's similar Blackbird. It helps that its first-time director, Lisa Dwyer Hogg, who performed in Harrower's play and Fiona Evans's equally uncomfortable Scarborough, knows her way around the twisted psychology of abuse and affection – both men here are friends – but Ireland's play is more unnerving because it voices societal horrors in normal, muted conversation. "I hope you don't die," the young man tells his rapist. "Thanks," the man replies.

Against Bob Crowley's striking and destabilising set, this lets a frighteningly cool Rea

and an edgy MacNeill downplay all sensationalism, and the play seems more slyly sympathetic to their damage than darkly exploitative. This meeting and its honest communication, we gradually understand, might abate further pain. Many will consider sexual abuse far too raw and real to work as a metaphor for broader conflict resolution, but David Ireland is brave to try, and in the questions and shudders he provokes, Field Day is clearly back in business.

Until Saturday

Peter Crawley ***