

A Taste O' The Irish — a collage of fragments

A Taste o' the Irish



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by Frank McGinn

A Taste o' The Irish, a new presentation of Pop Productions at Stages, is an evening of songs and stories mined from the motherlode which is the Emerald Isle. Artistic director Paul Ledoux has dug into Irish literature, music and folklore to come up with a ragbag assortment of 22 sketches organized into three acts. The players, two men and a woman, dash from low comedy to traditional tunes to samples of Swift, Beckett and J.M. Synge with just enough talent and grace to prevent audience attention failure under what would otherwise be an overdose o' the Irish.

Even if you are into the Irish, and who hasn't been at one time or another, the assortment here would give you dizzy spells. There are so many moods and madneses to be represented, and so little time. In the Playbill Ledoux explains that he tried to find the "essence of Ireland" but failed in this heroic task and instead offers a "collage of impressions, passions and ideas at war." This turns out to be more of a whirlwind than a collage, as random fragments of Irish culture spin before one's eyes at great speeds and, a simple man like myself, I couldn't help wishing that Ledoux had spent less time looking for his elusive essence and more on organizing the pieces to fit together with a little harmony.

Given that the show is segmented rather than a unified flow, some of the segments are well-selected, and most of them are well done. Irish music is as gay and haunting as its fairy folk and as alternately boisterous and maudlin as its drunks. This assortment of moods is realized with high good humour by the performers, particularly Scott MacMillan. The master musician of the trio, he does wring a tune out of anything from an empty jug to a piano. His cohorts in kilharmony, Tony Quinn and Cheryl Wagner, strum the old guitar and do most of the vocals. Quinn proves a pleasant baritone and Wagner sings in a sweet, lilting voice. Together with MacMillan's rougher, bar room growl they manage to strike the right note all the way from "Danny Boy" to "Finnegan's Wake."

Most of the acting-acting, however, as opposed to the singing-acting, is done by Quinn and Wagner alone. (MacMillan has a nice moment as the wooden constable in "Rising of the Moon" because he is a little stiff and awkward on stage anyway, but the demands of more subtle histrionics reveal him as a so-so amateur). These two devils, the slim, willowy type with naturally auburn hair, seem to have a natural affinity for the Irish soul and for each other. They score hits on their scene from *The Playboy of the Western World*, with Wagner an appetizing and avaricious Widow Quinn preying on the fame of the desperate murderer and in "A Brockel in Dublin," from Brendan Behan's *The Hostage*, a loony and cutting satire. Wagner's arbitrarily outstanding performance was the small child ghoulishly reciting ghastly nursery rhymes. Quinn's AOB was his Spike Milligan recitation "The Singing Foot," a harrowing tale told with breakneck aplomb.



Questionable were the high percentage of selections from the files of Lady Gregory, a hitherto unknown writer of Irish folklore and legend who, on the evidence, appears to merit her obscurity. Mainly old jokes and lacklustre histories, they taxed the cast beyond their range, which tended towards the elegant and sophisticated end of the spectrum. The direction of Swift's "A Modest Proposal," in which it is reasonably suggested that the solution to the Irish problem is for the peasants to raise their children for food, was right off. Quinn was led to play it with pompous buffonery, to the accompaniment of offstage revolted shouts, a la Monty P., whereas the material needs magnificent understatement to drive the cold irony home. And I cannot imagine a suitable excuse for tapping the sap of Irish genius and ignoring the invigorating outpourings of George Bernard Shaw.

There are certain flaws in *A Taste o' The Irish*, as illuminated, and certain virtues. Generally the good performances outweigh the lapses in administrative judgement, at least to the tune of two bills, which is what students are admitted for on Monday and Tuesday nights. The show runs until Dec. 13th.

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