

THEATER REVIEW: ‘Cripple of Inishmaan’ comes down to the characters at Salem State

By Keith Powers / Correspondent

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Every character in Martin McDonagh’s “The Cripple of Inishmaan” is cruel, or dense, or obsessed, or abusive. That’s what makes them so funny. The play runs at the Sophia Gordon Center at Salem State University through Oct. 29.

If you go...

WHAT: “The Cripple of Inishmaan”

WHERE: Sophia Gordon Center for Creative and Performing Arts, 356 Lafayette St., Salem

WHEN: through Oct. 29

TICKETS: \$20, \$15 senior/students, under 18 free. Visit www.salemstatetickets.com or call 978-542-6365.

Every character in Martin McDonagh’s “The Cripple of Inishmaan” is cruel, or dense, or obsessed, or abusive. That’s what makes them so funny.

Their flaws are so well drawn, and so uniformly consistent, that watching their interactions unfold around the star of the play, a “cripple” named Billy Claven, becomes an exercise in “what could they say next?”

Onstage now at the Sophia Gordon Center at Salem State University, McDonagh's play — written in the '90s, with successful stagings in London, New York, Los Angeles and elsewhere — visits the lonely Aran Islands off the Irish west coast. Set in 1934, the characters have little concern for socially aware language — thus “cripple,” many references to “coloreds,” and a constant dose of “feck this” and “fecking that.”

It's a tough play to stage, and those challenges were revealed in this performance. But the characters are perfectly defective diamonds, their deficiencies astutely drawn.

Billy's deficiencies are physical, and everyone lets him know it. There's cruel Helen, who kicks, punches, throws eggs and generally fends off the world with aggression. Johnnypateenmike gossips incessantly. Bartley is daft. Kate talks to rocks, and Eileen hides candy.

They make for quite the lot, on this messed-up little island. The plot revolves around Billy's dream to escape, using the filming of movie on nearby Inishmore as a stepping-stone to Hollywood. It's a bold and hapless dream for a rural “cripple,” and nobody believes he'll do it.

He doesn't. But in the telling, his belligerent, disparaging support group — if his companions on Inishmaan can be called that — surmise more than a little about themselves. “Inishmaan” is not a perfect play, but it's genuine, and tough-minded.

Pace gets to be a real problem in this production. The magic in this script lies in the characterizations, neatly drawn, and the dialogue, club-footed and injurious. Fired off at the right tempo, “The Cripple of Inishmaan” could be darkly funny in the way that the '70s comedy “All in the Family” was. Those characters said things you would never dream of saying, but in a way that had you laugh at the sheer tone-deafness of it all.

Here, too many scenes dragged along. The actors knew they were saying awful things, zingers that would be too incorrect for any contemporary conversation. But instead of piling one on top of another, they simply waited for each laugh line. Dead air filled the theater.

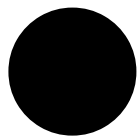
Often it was not that the pace of dialogue was too slow, but that it was unchanging. Attempts at cruel humor simply sounded like cruelty.

Sets were unassuming, capturing the rocky island and its common folk. The lighting and the costumes were appropriate, unobtrusive. Diction was a problem; deep Irish accents were only half understandable, and other actors barely attempted to pass for Aran Islanders.

Sammi Simonds brought Billy to life, and Olivia Raso spat her way through the truculent role of Helen with energy. Stephen Zubricki IV, as the pivotal gossip/newsgatherer Johnnypateenmike, brought terrific physical skills to the part. Bill Cunningham directed.

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Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR’s ARTery. Follow [@PowersKeith](https://twitter.com/PowersKeith); email to keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com



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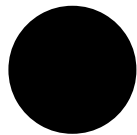
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