

**GREATER MANCHESTER DRAMA FEDERATION  
3 ACT PLAY FESTIVAL 2018/19**

<b>Society</b>	CHADS
<b>Title</b>	Molly Sweeney
<b>Author</b>	Brian Friel
<b>Date &amp; Time</b>	Saturday 23 <sup>rd</sup> February 2019 at 7:45pm
<b>Venue</b>	CHADS Studio
<b>Contact/host name</b>	Hamish Lawson
<b>Contact on the night</b>	Kathryn Way
<b>Young actors in cast?</b>	No
<b>Licence available</b>	Yes

**Production highlights:**

Sensitive direction

Excellent performances

Good atmosphere created by the whole team on and off stage

**To think about for the future:**

Focus on clarity and pace in some of the dialogue

## THE PRODUCTION

<p><i>Adjudicator writes and identifies themes, challenges and requirements, etc., and details the requirements and elements of the production in which he was particularly interested.</i></p>	
<p><b>TECHNICAL</b></p>	
<p><b>Set and props</b>  <i>A set which shows creativity and innovation and addresses the style of the production. Is well constructed.            Props which are in period, authentic in appearance and placed strategically e.g. furniture.</i></p>	<p>There is no guidance in the script as to what setting this play should have and it would have been feasible to have no set at all. However, the backing of the three window frames worked really well. Each character's window helped mark out their space on stage and the individual designs of the windows gave each space its own character. The furniture was well chosen – three different chairs for the characters with appropriate cushion, throw, tables, magazine, books and glasses to create three distinct areas. Simplicity was the key here and the fact that there was no excessive set or dressing put the focus directly on the actors.</p>
<p><b>Lighting and Sound</b>  <i>Lighting and sound effects which contribute towards the dramatic potential, etc.</i></p>	<p><b><u>Lighting</u></b>            Although space was limited, the lighting provided three good acting areas which were well defined by the bands of light and the lighting behind the window frames provided a good effect for the back drop for each area. Lighting changes were well judged to alter the audience's focus and were well timed to complement the dialogue and the mood changes. I liked the occasional scene when two areas were lit simultaneously allowing the audience to see the other characters reactions to the dialogue giving a sense that the characters were not completely isolated.</p> <p><b><u>Sound</u></b>            It was a quiet night for Heather on the whole but the haunting Irish music was well chosen, played at good volume and faded well to introduce the Acts. I liked the underscoring of the final speech which added atmosphere to the finale and the swell of the music brought the play to conclusive end.</p>
<p><b>Costumes</b>  <i>Costumes which are in of the period, well fitting, colour co-ordinated and enhance characterisation.</i></p>	<p>Costumes were simple and remained the same throughout. Molly's floral dress fitted with the character of a rural Irish woman. There was a good distinction between the men's costumes – Frank's casual cords, check shirt and waistcoat contrasting well with Rice's more formal suit and</p>

**Makeup and hair**

*Make hair and wigs which are in period and appropriate to the production (including size of venue) and assist in developing the character.*

bow tie. The pencil behind the ear was also a nice touch for Frank.

## **DIRECTION**

*Detailed study/knowledge and interpretation of the text;  
progressing the author's intent with creativity and sensitivity.*

*Using theatrical dynamics to communicate with the audience.*

*Appropriate delivery of the text using timing and rhythm.*

*Settings with regard to focus, pace and groupings.*

*Movement which is appropriate to the period and style of  
production.*

*Creating atmosphere and mood to develop the full dramatic impact.*

### **Direction – John Blunden-Ellis**

In some ways this play shouldn't work – 3 people in an isolated position talking of past events. It goes against all the playwright's rules of '*show don't tell*'. However, the insightful performances of the storytellers, the atmosphere created and the connections between the characters generated the necessary energy for it to succeed.

What I liked about this production was the atmosphere and the simplicity, yet crucial sincerity of the whole mood of the setting and the characters. John and his cast brought this script to life and filled it with character and back story so that it all made sense and we felt as though we were observing real people who had real lives. This play is certainly a challenge and yet with the right team it is a beautiful and thought provoking piece. I mentioned in the technical section that the setting was simple so that the focus can be on the actors. This puts a great deal of pressure on the actors but John had chosen a cast who were talented and committed to their roles. This is not a play to be attempted with a half heart and everyone clearly put in a great deal of thought and time in getting it right.

The plotting was a challenge. There are no moves scripted and in a play like this there is always the possibility of lack of action. However, rather than have these characters just sitting or standing in their isolated positions John had created spontaneous looking moves to keep this production animated and interesting. In such a small space there are not many options for plotting and although each actor remained in his or her acting space they never looked restricted or limited in their moves. Moves were varied and suited the dialogue. Some sequences were accompanied by moves and gestures appropriate to the characters whereas quite often actors stayed sitting for a length of time which only worked well because this cast was capable of maintaining the audience's attention with the dialogue. The 'resting' actors were obviously still visible to the audience and so their positions were always meaningful. It didn't matter too much if there was some subtle movement but on the whole the actors remained still and inconspicuous and this enabled the audience to focus on the speaking actor. I liked the use of the windows especially in the scene where Mr Rice sees the couple arrive. The inclusion of the window expanded Rice's world out beyond his armchair and gave the space a new depth. The final positions created a particularly emotional tableau and gave a poignant and thought-provoking end to this production. Characterisations were well drawn. Each character was distinctive and was able to express the narrative from their individual perspective. The contrasts

were clear and there was a particularly good distinction between Rice and Frank; Rice's measured, dignified approach was in sharp contrast to Frank's feverish energy. The pacing of the whole piece was carefully considered in order to convey the characters and the story. I loved the variety of storytelling throughout the production, from Frank's excitable and energetic onslaught and Molly's gentle but evocative delivery to Rice's more reserved and pensive style.

There was an excellent transition from the excitement at the end of Molly's first speech in Act II to Rice's cold delivery of his fearful first speech. As the story is implied rather than acted out it is left to the actors to bring the story to life for the audience so that they can piece the monologues together.

Delivering a monologue is a skill in itself; delivering a whole play of monologues takes great care and consideration to avoid the monotony of listening to one style of delivery all night. John and his cast had clearly worked hard to ensure that this production was varied and always engaging. Each actor had their own individual style and each monologue was approached differently. John and his cast handled the 'memory monologues' very well. Rather than indicating that the characters were merely remembering a past event, the three actors related, relived, and reconsidered the past events bringing them to life and adding layers of observation and retrospection. This is a detailed process and I thought John and his cast had worked well to make this process look effortless.

What was clear in this production was the unmistakable regard for the script and the characters. There was a desire to tell the story in the clearest and most sincere way and there was no denying the work and thought that had gone into creating the whole production. The strength of the characters and the unfolding story was really strong. Each of the characters came across as real and the relationships between them were well crafted with genuine feeling and expression.

John had a terrific cast but he knew what to do with them - he clearly expected a great deal and he got it. The concentration, dedication and commitment required, was given by every member of the cast and it produced intelligent and sensitive performances as well as a well rounded production.

Congratulations to John. I'm sure he was very proud of his cast and crew and what they all achieved.

## ACTORS

*Characterisation which is believable shows flair, originality and understanding.*

*Vocal technique which is appropriate to the play and is delivered with understanding and a good technique.*

*Movement which is in character and in period and incorporating movement to deliver pace.*

*Supporting ones fellow actor unselfishly and enhancing his performance.*

*Using all available theatrical skills to make a noticeable contribution to the play.*

*(Include individual adjudications for each actor.)*

### **Molly Sweeney – Tracy Burns**

This was an engaging performance from beginning to end. Tracy's accent was impeccable and every word was clear with a lovely variety of delivery. Her variation of vocal delivery worked well in this role, using different tones and pitches to portray different characters within the monologues. For example, Rita's deep tone was always distinctive and the Father and young Molly were clearly differentiated in Act I sc. 1 through Tracy's ability to create separate voices for them.

There were so many moments of quality acting in this performance that I can't possible mention them all but I will pick out just a few that stood out for me. The *'immerse yourself in darkness'* speech in Act II was so well measured and Tracy conveyed all Molly's panic and then surpassed herself with a fantastic recovery from that panic. Her monologue about the party was narrated beautifully with a roller-coaster of emotions flowing effortlessly into each other. Every character at the party was described with colourful personality and Tracy altered her delivery for each scenario with a lovely variation of facial expressions. The morose decline when Molly thought about the operation was paced beautifully and the subsequent frustration and anger followed on seamlessly. Tracy's delivery changed again for the hornpipe sequence and we heard a fast, powerful and fierce delivery here to match the actions described and finally the sink into anxiety completed a monologue tour de force. Tracey didn't just tell the story or describe the characters; she put meaning into every bit of the script. Even the most seemingly insignificant aside was filled with substance and meaning. For instance, *'Every night. Seven nights a week'* gave us more than just a time frame – there was depth and intensity in the subtext here and Tracey communicated it clearly and consummately with precision in her intonation in order to pick out Molly's hidden irritation.

From the start, Tracy painted a detailed picture with every speech. The Father's garden, the hospital, the flower shop – I could see them all clearly from her vivid and expressive delivery of the descriptions. She brought meaning to every line and she filled this role with a great energy.

Physically, this was a challenging role and Tracy did a fine job. She avoided the stereotypical blind character and, as suggested in the script, she played Molly as a fully sighted person with just the occasional clue to her disability. With very little space every movement, every turn of the head, every gesture was significant and Tracy managed to make the smallest of moves meaningful. I liked the way she animated the conversation between father and daughter by the slight incline of the head as Father looked down at Molly or Molly looked up at Father. When Tracy delivered dialogue about *'touching'* or *'tactile*

*perceptions*' she ensured that the words were accompanied by appropriate feeling of the chair or the shilling or any other described object. On a deeper level, Tracy recreated the vulnerability necessary for the final scene when talking about her Mother in the hospital. Tracy's character seemed to age in the final scene and although there was no obvious alteration in her performance she introduced a frailty into both her physical and vocal performance to communicate the transition in Molly.

Tracy managed to capture her character's excitement, joy and expectation as well as Molly's more darker and subtle emotions such as her vulnerability, bewilderment and underlying fear. So deep was her passion for this character that I felt almost envious of Molly's world and her experiences that were beyond my reality as a sighted person.

This performance was so full and engaging and I don't think Tracy wasted a single line all evening. That takes time and effort, great commitment to the role and above all great skill – all of which Tracy brought to this performance. Congratulations to Tracey on an outstanding performance.

### **Mr Rice – Sandy McGregor**

This was a controlled and very watchable performance from Sandy and he played Rice with a subtle dignity. Sandy had a convincing and clear accent with good enunciation. I liked the muted laughter that underscored some of his dialogue as Rice was wryly amused at his own comments. This made Sandy's delivery more natural adding meaning to his dialogue and depth to his character. I thought his first speech was particularly difficult; a long and full account relating facts about Molly, Frank and the case. This could have been a really dull introduction to Mr Rice but Sandy managed it extremely well, pacing the dialogue perfectly and at the same time drawing out the strands of his own character.

Much of Rice's dialogue comes from a state of great emotion that has already been felt by the character – Sandy did not overtly display Rice's emotion rather what he gave us was his character's handling of that emotion – quite a different thing. Sandy handled the phone call to the Professor with great attitude and sense of self-importance. His pausing was excellent and gave the dialogue variety and meaning. The pause between '*...fell asleep in the armchair*' and '*I woke again at 4am*' was particularly well judged to indicate the time lapse. There was good force for the final speech of Act I and Sandy made the most of the final scene of this Act leaving the audience with a strong and measured final line to take us to the interval.

The variety in Sandy's performance was first-rate – for instance, his first scene in Act II moved from the painfully pointed line '*I subsided into a terrible darkness*' and was followed by the description of performing Molly's operation which was fast, excitable and impulsive with animated hand gestures.

For me, one of the highlights of Sandy's performance was his '*It was Roger Bloomstein*' speech as he described Roger's phone call the night before the operation. Sandy's recall of this emotional moment in Rice's life was paced brilliantly and his physical performance here was devastating. There was no need for exaggerated delivery or extravagant reactions – Sandy's hunched physicality and grip of the back of the chair conveyed all the pain his character was still feeling. His breakdown was excellent and Sandy skilfully portrayed Rice's insecurity and vulnerability here. The slow recovery, even after his lights had faded, was so well judged to make this a beautiful scene in his

performance. As a consequence of this back story, his later speech in Act II describing Maria's final goodbye only needed to be delivered very simply to be evocative and effective.

Sandy's physical performance was controlled and considered. The occasional raised steeple hand position captured his character's outward confidence. He made good use of his personal props – he looked comfortable with the glass in his hand, almost as a permanent fixture and yet he still gestured naturally. He made good use of his spectacles, taking them off at appropriate moments of focus. His gestures were never overstated and he made this a focused, purposeful and charming performance.

Sandy played this role with insight and skill to bring to life a flawed but likeable character. Congratulations to Sandy on a beautifully measured and emotional performance.

### **Frank Sweeney – Michael Gallagher**

This was a full on and lively performance from Michael. His first monologue was vigorous and spirited with an energy that stayed with him for his whole performance. Michael's delivery contrasted well with the other two characters. He was exuberant and chatty, taking in the entire studio and occasionally addressing individual members of the audience. He had a very good connection with the audience and this took confidence and focus. He took complete ownership of the stage whenever he spoke and even during the black outs he maintained his character's body language.

His timing of comedy lines and his pauses were good so that he often received well deserved audience reaction. I liked his interjected lines such as '*How did I get into that?*' which were well judged and gave his dialogue a more measured quality. Michael certainly created a vivid character and he lived up to the enthusiasm and passion mentioned in Molly's speeches.

The speeches surrounding the first date were handled well. Michael described this date without any romance, just as another one of his many factual accounts. Yet there was a lovely tenderness in his gaze when he was sitting and remembering during Molly's account.

Michael's accent was very strong and convincing. Occasionally I found it difficult to catch every word. Certain words were a little indistinct as Michael sometimes rushed and missed out the middle of the word – for example, '*suddenly*' became '*su..ly*'. It is debatable how far one should take an accent but I think the priority always has to be clarity – even if the precision of the accent suffers a little. It is, of course, possible to start off your delivery fractionally slower so that the audience can get used to an accent and once they have adapted then gradually build up to a more pacey authentic delivery. The speed of Michael's delivery was very impressive and he rattled through the dialogue almost without stopping. This certainly fitted his character well and gave his speeches a frenetic, excitable quality which was just right for Frank. There were points in his dialogue where I thought Michael could have afforded to slow the pace a little. The first speech in Act II was an example; the story of the cornflowers is so lovely and maybe Michael could have savoured the emotion of this section a little more and the final line of this monologue needed to be more measured to give the audience the sense that Frank's own perception is heightened and he is starting to see Molly's character a little more clearly. Michael captured Frank's passion very well in his final scene as the delivery escalated towards his final emotional '*Oh Jesus*'

With his boundless energy and impulsive delivery, Michael gave a splendid contrast to the other two characters and brought some good humour to the production. Well done.

**OVERALL ACHIEVEMENT (or CONCLUSION)**

*An excellent understanding of the author's intent. Direction which shows skill, originality, sensitivity and creativity using all the theatrical tools of pace, focus, delivery, timing and rhythm.*

*Talented actors creating highly effective dramatic impact.*

*Evidence of teamwork and unselfish ensemble playing.*

*Actors who interact and react and a production team who use all resources to create atmosphere and mood.*

**John and his team had worked hard to create the right atmosphere for this challenging piece. He had a very capable cast and the characters were clear, meaningful and interesting. The pace was good and the delivery was emotional, exciting and affecting. Despite the three actors playing isolated roles there was a good connection between them. Alongside a simple but distinctive set and good support from the entire backstage team, this was a well thought out and very enjoyable and engaging telling of a beautiful story. Well done to everyone involved.**

<b>Adjudicator (print)</b>	Carmel Bird
<b>Date</b>	9 <sup>th</sup> March 2019