

molly sweeney | the belltable | may

Before I went to Molly Sweeney, I was perturbed because one night previously two friends had exited at the interval so uncharmed were they by the London Classic Theatre company's performance at the Belltable. One of these women actually thought the play had ended at the interval! They had a litany of complaints - Molly's stance was like that of a physically disabled person rather than that of a blind person, Mr. Rice was not really engaging; they doubted his conviction, the costumes did not situate the actors in any particular era and finally the subject matter wasn't a patch on usual night-time viewing, namely Eastenders.

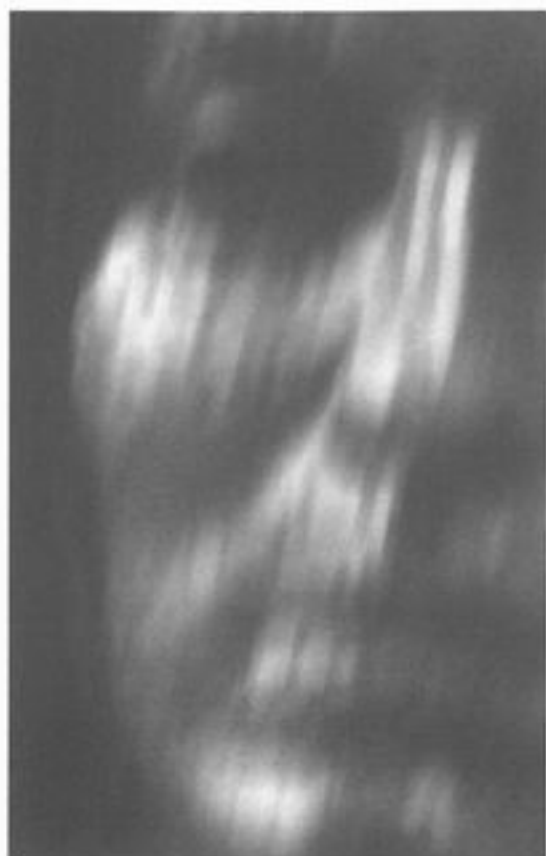
I have to say my experience was not a negative as theirs but you had to be very awake and not preoccupied by anything else in order to enjoy Molly Sweeney. Molly Sweeney, blind for almost forty years, has made a life for herself in darkness. Now the 'gift of sight' may be available. Through a series of intertwined monologues, the three characters, Molly, her husband Frank and ophthalmologist Mr Rice tell this poignant and fascinating story of hope, courage and deep humanity. In this production there was no set to distract the eye, the actors were placed on three chairs on an empty stage and the action took the form of monologues delivered to the audience in order to relate the tale of Molly Sweeney. So, you understand now why it was necessary to be ever alert. Molly opened the show with a childhood memory and to be honest, her posture was perplexing and served to distract me from the text. Frank, her husband had all the funny lines and gleaned a few laughs from the audience. Mr. Rice, good orator, appeared suitably distinguished before the cracks began to appear and he portrayed his own blindness more subtly.

I warmed a little more to the play in the second act, Eastenders certainly did not beckon me home. I did want to find out what happened and this second act was much more entertaining; it was kept lively by Frank's delivery. Overall a lot more could have been made of lighting and props to enhance the performance. The same could be said about costumes, even a costume change at the interval would have been a little relief from the austerity of the bare stage. One of the aforementioned friends remarked that it was very much like being at a radio play - except that she has actually been at radio play performances that were more visually interesting.

I spoke to a member of the audience at the interval and we conversed lightly about the play. She herself had had a meal and a few glasses of wine before the performance and admitted that she had almost nodded off and her partner certainly had. Both this couple and the audience came to Molly Sweeney because of the tremendous respect and admiration they have for Friel's work.

The play itself held many messages about hope, courage and the different levels of blindness. Friel also used this soliloquy method in delivering his poetic language with Faith Healer. This was staged last summer by Island Theatre Company in the same venue. Both plays struck a chord with their treatment of human foibles but Island's use of props, lighting and staging ultimately meant that this latter play resonated for longer with me.

niamh bowen



the driven | the savoy | may 23



After their forty days in the wilderness talking to the vegetation, The Driven played their first proper gig in Limerick since recruiting a new rhythm section in Termites. Novo Castro, a group of young contenders from Newcastle West (the name, it's Latin, clever clogs), were the first support act and they launched into their set like a drag racer, priming the crowd with high octane guitars and propulsion drumming. Tight like a virgin, their sound owed a little to Britpop with singer James Mullins having an air of Ian Brown about him. Which is no bad thing.

Next up was Nu-Clone, a South African band with the sort of industrial drone sound pioneered by the Velvet Underground and carried on by the likes of Interpol. Looking like escapees from the Hitler youth, they also did a decent cover of Gary Jules' cover of the Tears for Fears song 'Mad World' popularized by Donnie Darko, the best film of the last year (if you haven't seen it, kill yourself.)

And then, the main event; the club is filled now and my teeth are shaking a little as The Driven take the stage. They kick off with 'Speed' and as they rip into 'Monkey in a Cage' I feel certain the paint must be peeling from the walls. But this isn't any trash punk noise fest, these guys got the lyrics, the melodies and the beats to roll as well as rock; the whole front row of the club was actually dancing, when the last time you saw that at a rock gig? Lead singer Brendan Markham's body is jangling as if there are 2,000 volts going through it, a slot machine about to hit the jackpot.

The new boys, Ivan Mulqueen on bass and Glen Cahill on drums, keep a fierce, tight rhythm going, while Darren Mullins is in the Johnny Marr/John Squire mould of melodic, aloof lead guitarists. Whilst his between song patter is restricted to the odd 'Thank You,' Markham's stage presence is magnetic and as the band tear through their blistering set, the crowd take on a slightly dazed look as the ferocity of the band's talent breaks over them in wave after wave. In the aftermath, with a dj playing a few tunes to try and calm us down, I approach an "upbeat" Markham telling him I need a quote for the review;

"We're gonna blaze a trail through this country the likes of which haven't been seen since Brian Boru! How's that?" Easy, boy, the leash will break. You've been warned, the best band you never heard of are out for blood and coming your way.

john hayes