

Dreamland

Jim Nolan

Úna Kealy

It is June 1934 and Seafield, a fictitious coastal town near Waterford, which provides the setting for Jim Nolan's new play *Dreamland*. Atmospheric and sensory conditions are oppressive as a 70-tonne whale, washed up on the strand, stinks, rots and bakes in a heat wave. Johnny Kinanne, an Irish man referred to by some as "the Yank" because of his thirty years in New York, has bought the salvage rights to the whale whose skeleton he intends to display as the first of many attractions in his planned theme park, the eponymous Dreamland.

Kinanne, played with wry charm by Brendan Conroy, is a character of limitless energy and ambition: he procures the whale, envisages a theme park, organises a community dance and even creates electricity. However, although his dreams are huge, his successes are disproportionately small: although the whale is salvaged, its skeleton is compromised; while electricity is generated, the power is unpredictable; and only six people, including himself, attend the dance. However, what is important in *Dreamland* is not the extent of Kinanne's successes but that he represents the importance of the freedom to dream and maintain an independence of mind and spirit amid a society that prioritises conformity. What is similarly important is that such freedom goes hand in hand with compassion, creativity and community building, and is a means of defence against the prejudice, violence and small-mindedness that often presents itself under the guise of nationalistic fervour.

The world of the play is fraught with the aggression of the ever-strengthening right-wing Army Comrades Association (ACA) and the residual tensions burning between the pro- and anti-Treaty factions following the formation of the Free State. *Dreamland* depicts an Ireland divided by hatreds of the recent past and presents a country on the brink of admitting new hatreds dressed up in blue shirts which, the drama suggests, give license to continue and intensify prejudice, antagonism and violence. Events and characters in the town of Seafield reach a moment of crisis and climax with the arrival of two Jews, played by Michael Power and Holly Browne, who are seeking asylum from Nazi Germany. Their presence exposes the obnoxious xenophobia of the Blueshirt movement as personified by a pair of villains with a grim enthusiasm for sadistic and abusive behaviour, menacingly portrayed by Karl Shiels and Michael Quinlan.

Kate Moylan's costume design suggests character through colour and texture and, combined with Dermot Quinn's set, creates an ambience of historical authenticity. Moylan's costumes are most striking when Shiels and Quinlan appear in their ACA shirts complete with buckles, belts and insignia, encapsulating the trussed up and aggressively self-important righteousness of fascism. Quinn's set, depicting the interior of Kinnane's public house in Act One and the exterior in Act Two, is crumbling around the edges suggesting a community striving to maintain appearances of respectability in the face of economic hardship. Quinn's set rises to a roughly finished top line where windows cut upwards in jagged edges implying the innate violence and cruelty of Irish society – but the effect is muted and the overall impression is somewhat disappointing in a play so dark and dangerous at its

core. Though providing a visually interesting playing space in Act One, Quinn's set in Act Two is flat and becomes an obstacle the actors must move around rather than through in order to access the stage.

Conall Keating creates an energetic and endearingly naïve Dinny, while Des Keogh brings qualities of congeniality and experience to the role of Doc. Michael Power and Holly Browne give understated performances as the exiled German Jews while Catherine Walsh presents a spirited but hard-edged Grace. Nolan's script and direction is occasionally weighed down by exposition but it is patently obvious that the political and human story that this play seeks to tell is neither neat nor simple.

The production ultimately celebrates the integrity of the human spirit and is characterised by gentle good humour, but Nolan closes down the comedy when necessary to create a penetrating critique of self-serving politics, a national tendency towards group-thinking, and the danger of devaluing art and the individual. The many references to J.M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* align *Dreamland* with a type of Irish theatre that asks questions about the kind of society we create and what motivates us to act and behave as we do. At a time when many in Ireland unwittingly accept a neo-liberalist agenda that prioritises corporations over communities and economic gain over personal fulfilment, *Dreamland* suggests that an alternative to the greed and self-interest that has so dominated Irish politics in recent times is possible. Promoting the ideals of personal freedom and collective responsibility, the play also acknowledges the value of those idealistic few who dare to march to the beat of their own drum.

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7 Feb – 15 March, 2014 (on tour)

Garter Lane Arts Centre & The Everyman Cork with Project Arts Centre Dublin

in Garter Lane Arts Centre

Written and directed by Jim Nolan

Set design: Dermot Quinn

Costume Design: Kate Moylan

Lighting Design: Barry McKinney

Sound Design: Jamie Beamish

Flight Director: Donal O'Farrell

With: Brendan Conroy, Conall Keating, Des Keogh, Catherine Walsh, Michael Power, Karl Shields, Michael Quinlan and Holly Browne.