

**Frank Pig Says Hello by Patrick McCabe**

**Produced by Mill Productions**

Reviewed by Úna Kealy in the Theatre Royal, Waterford

17<sup>th</sup> October, 2013

**Director:** Geoff O'Keefe

**Set Design:** Gerard Bourke

**Lighting Design:** Barry Donaldson

**Costume Design:** Dympna Murray

**Sound Design:** Declan Brennan

**Cast:** Patrick O'Donnell and Gerard Adlum

Patrick McCabe's *Frank Pig Says Hello* is an explosively powerful, angry-poignant and ultimately heart-rending dramatization of Frank Brady who, as a young boy and adolescent, is driven beyond the boundaries of his mental and emotional health by his inability to cope with growing up, the loss of his parents and the preservation of his damaged and fragile mental and emotional health. Emphasising the difficulties that Frank experiences McCabe splits his eponymous character into two; an adult Frank, played, for Mill Productions, by Patrick O'Donnell, and a juvenile Frank, known as Piglet, and played by Gerard Adlum. Adlum is well cast by director Geoff O'Keefe as the wide-eyed, fresh-faced, awkwardly innocent Piglet who gradually metamorphoses into a darkly merciless butcher boy by the end of the play and similarly Patrick O'Donnell, with his sharp features and lean physical frame evokes the terrible trauma that Frank suffers during the play. O'Donnell plays over thirty additional characters during the course of the play and, for the most part, meets the demand for huge energy, razor-sharp focus and physical and emotional versatility. Under O'Keefe's direction both actors find a physical dexterity that is captivating to watch and impressive in its focus and energy, however, occasionally both performers betray a lack of physical training and/or experience that dulls the knife edge of precision and pace that this play demands. Arguably O'Donnell's portrayal of female characters is less successful than their male counterparts: Ma and Mrs Nugent appear as one-dimensionally hysterical which consequently diminishes the emotional impact of the terrible events that overtake them. Similarly there are times, mostly towards the end of the play, when Adlum's portrayal of Piglet lacks menace but overall both actors and director admirably express the tensions, emotions and poignancy of the drama.

Gerard Bourke creates a set which expresses the themes of the play with artful simplicity. A narrow towering section of dirty cream wall tapering in towards the top dominates the stage slightly off centre. Towards the top of this wall is a narrow three-barred window which angles inwards on itself narrowing towards the bottom while thin black lines splay out from the base of the wall subtly confusing and disorientating the eye. Butted onto this slab of wall is a stub wall which functions as, amongst other things, a bicycle, a flying platform, a window into the Nugent's house and furniture in the Brady home. Both of these walls are situated atop a small square platform which forms the limits of the playing area and the narrow square of space that Bourke makes available to the actors creates an atmosphere of restrictive claustrophobia which becomes particularly resonant as the play comes to its poignant conclusion. Barry Donaldson's lighting design finds full expression on Bourke's set as the lights flash yellow to orange to white to red to green and to vivid turquoise emphasising and enhancing the emotional charge and volatility of the drama. While sometimes distracting in the sheer number of lighting states the bold, expressionistic design creates both mood and location and adds vividly to the play's atmosphere.

Less successful is Declan Brennan's soundscape both in terms of design and implementation. Difficult to hear at times and sometimes off cue the soundscape seems an afterthought to the production though the menacing whispering of Frank's name towards the end is both sinister and evocative of the gradual unravelling of his mental state. Dympna Murray's costumes dress the characters in the innocuous britches, shirt and waistcoat uniform of small-town 1950s Ireland and the deliberate contrast of costume style with performance and production aesthetic results in visually simple but striking imagery that deliberately undercuts any tendency towards nostalgia but rather contributes to the creation of a critical distance between actors and audience.

The production, though flawed in places, creates a poignant picture of how loneliness, social exclusion and emotional and mental fragility can result in a catastrophic crisis of identity that leads to a shattering of the individual. *Frank Pig Says Hello* is a precursor to Pat Kinevan's *Silent* (playing during November on the Peacock stage) and, at a time when less and less state funding is found to support those who suffer mental and emotional dysfunction in Ireland the story of Frank Pig remains sadly relevant to Irish audiences.

Úna Kealy is a lecturer in Theatre Studies and English in Waterford Institute of Technology.