



Adelaide Theatre Guide

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ULSTER AMERICAN

The Adelaide Festival

Dunstan Playhouse

Until 17 Mar 2019

Review by Jamie Wright

In a flat in London, director Leigh Carver and Oscar-winning actor Jay Conway discuss the play they're about to start rehearsing while waiting for playwright Ruth Davenport to arrive. All have very different motivations for being there – and, as it turns out, equally varied interpretations of what the play itself is about. Carver and Conway get off to an awkward start, and things get even more out of hand once Davenport arrives.

David Ireland's "Ulster American" discomforts right from the very beginning – and at no point does that cease; instead, it's used as the framework upon which is build an hour and a half of blisteringly funny and brilliantly insightful pitch-black comedy. It produces laughter of the nervous kind you'd expect at the inclusion of taboo subjects, alternating with the genuine guffaws at the humour which is at times more along the lines of classic stage farce or a television situation comedy.

Much of the play deals with the politics of Northern Ireland, both past and present, so it would help to have an understanding of that – though enough can be gleaned via context that it's unlikely to confuse viewers, and it is by no means dependent on a knowledge of those events; rather, it's using what was at the heart of that conflict to ask questions about the universal concept of the sense of identity and the dependence on being perceived as something easily labelled. Who you are really versus who it is you claim to be, which labels you choose to self-apply, and whether or not that application is accurate or honest. Few are safe from criticism: the English, the Northern Irish, Protestants, Catholics, Irish-Americans, actors (particularly the clueless ones who don't bother to do their research before accepting a part), directors and (of course) critics are all on the receiving end.

Gareth Nicolls' direction has the cast of three moving almost non-stop throughout, matching the energy of the text – but they almost always inhabit separate spaces on stage, so on those occasions when the characters invade each other's personal space you can feel the tension rise even further.

Performances from all three – Darrell D'Silva, Robert Jack and Lucianne McEvoy – are exceptional; the dialogue is unceasingly rapid-fire and the physical aspects hugely demanding. In particular Robert Jack, as Leigh, manifests the oft-lampooned British tendency of struggling to find a polite way of disagreeing without saying anything that could be interpreted as offensive – while it's mostly in the face, at times his whole body twists as he dissembles, and it's mesmerising.

"Ulster American" is undoubtedly outrageous and shocking, bordering on ludicrous at times; it's not going to be to everyone's taste. But beneath the bombast is a razor-sharp skewering of failings – egotism and hypocrisy, amongst others – and that should be what lingers afterwards.