



Purdue Theatre's 'Beauty Queen' a dark comedy with Irish accent

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Written by Tim Brouk

Every day is Mother's Day in "The Beauty Queen of Leenane."

And that's a living hell for the play's title character.

Maureen Folan and her 70-year-old mom, Mag Folan, propel the dark comedy/thriller/drama by standout Anglo-Irish playwright Martin McDonagh.

"The Beauty Queen of Leenane" will make its Purdue Theatre debut at 7:30 tonight at Hansen Theatre inside Pao Hall. The show continues Friday through Feb. 26.

Directed by Gordon McCall, an associate professor of theater, "The Beauty Queen of Leenane" has shocking moments between daughter and mother balanced by humor, a brand of comedy that matches the television and film of today, which often goes to disturbing, dark places. It's no surprise that McDonagh has been dubbed the Quentin Tarantino of U.K. playwrights.

"We call it 'laugh and gasp' theater," McCall said.

Maureen (played by Jennifer Sandlin) is the play's title character and has taken care of Mag (Kristine Holtvedt) most of her adult life. The caretaking and dysfunctionality has disallowed any meaningful relationship with a man. The title is not literal as Maureen now is 40 and rarely gets out of the small cottage in the Irish countryside she shares with her mother.

Most representations of Ireland concentrate on the sweeping beautiful landscape and its rich culture and traditions. McDonagh looks at the isolation and deep relationships in "Beauty Queen."

The isolation is increased by the unique set developed by McCall and designer Derek Miller, a Purdue Theatre graduate student. Inspired by Japan's classic No Theatre, the set is on risers above the stage and the players cannot be seen going into the wings to leave the stage. With Michael McNamara's lighting design, Mag and Maureen are marooned on a dingy, hateful island.

At times, Mag and Maureen are more like cellmates than family.

McDonagh's script might be recommended for mature audiences, but it doesn't take away from his writing. McCall and the small cast, which includes Mark Sherlock and Matthew Joseph Schmidli as brothers Pato and Ray Dooley, respectively, relish the script. To make sure they get that Irish brogue down, all communications have come with an Irish accent.

"We haven't done anything like this before," said Holtvedt, associate professor of theatre at Purdue who plays Mag. "It's extremely demanding on the entire creative team."

McDonagh's script contains challenges for the cast, but the language pulls them in.

"The first thing I latched onto this script is the words he chooses," said Sandlin, a senior studying theater. "Clobber.' That's my favorite word in the script. He doesn't say 'hit' or 'smack.' He says 'clobber.' He sets you up as an actor to succeed."

Author and director of the 2008 Colin Farrell film "In Bruges," McDonagh had an astounding output in the mid-1990s. He wrote seven plays in a nine-month span. When "Beauty Queen" opened on Broadway in 1998, McDonagh was the most produced playwright in North America at that time besides William Shakespeare, said McCall, whose family tree is three generations away from Ireland.

"The Beauty Queen of Leenane" is no "Barefoot in the Park," but it is part of Purdue Theatre's mission for its students and its audience.

"Theater has to comfort and provoke, and we were a little high on the comfort side," McCall said. "If we're going to be pursuing a mandate of education, we need to explore the world of theater in all of its colors.

"It's provocative and is exactly what we should be doing occasionally."