

The Cripple of Inishmaan

Martin McDonagh

society/company: **Banbury Cross Players** ([directory](#))

performance date: **11 Jul 2018**

venue: **The Mill Arts Centre, Spiceball Pk Road, Banbury, OX16 5QE**

reviewer/s: **Alex Wood** (Sardines review)

What a delightful end-of-season treat Banbury Cross Players served up with this fine, funny and thought-provoking play.

Reading about the island of Inishmaan, one of the three Aran Islands in Galway Bay, it immediately becomes obvious that this will be an extraordinary play. Isolated, with no more than 200 people living there today, it must be a remarkable place. And, in the imagination of Martin McDonagh, basing his play in the 1930s, it certainly is.



Crippled from birth, Billy is an orphan, looked after by his aunts who keep the

local store. The store is visited by various people; the island gossip, a foolish boy and his tough sister, the island's doctor, a boatman and the gossip's sort of a mother. An American film crew have turned up on a neighbouring island and fame, fortune and adventure beckon - the brother and sister get the boatman to take them over and Billy, in spite of the boatman's concerns about his safety, manages to join them. Much to the surprise, not to say shock, of one and all, Billy is taken to Hollywood for a screen test...

Part of the play's appeal lies in its many reflections on Irish life - not only in the 1930's but today. The need to 'get away', the relationship with England being just two. I especially liked the reference to even French, Germans and dentists moving to Ireland - a comfort blanket to reassure the impoverished islanders that perhaps things weren't so bad!

And the play is SO funny! Sweary (very), quickfire, often unsubtle and outrageous. Against that there is plenty to think about, not least the way the islanders treat Billy - thoughtful, intelligent and well-read - as a boy girls ran away from and boys derided him; he is known on the island as Cripple Billy. As he says 'Everyone is crippled - but it is only those crippled on the outside that you see.'

Aunt Kate was played with just the right note of nervy edginess by Clare Lester. Janice Lake played Aunt Eileen, more sympathetic but calming her nerves by eating the shop's stock of imported American sweets - a nice balance was struck between the two of them. Dave Candy was convincing as Babbybobby the boatman, combining his down-to-earth nature with a softer side and Andrew Whiffin was very well cast as Doctor McSharry.

Nik Lester made for a superb Johnnypateenmike, the town gossip, armed with his notebook of facts and gossip, which he exchanged for whatever he could get from his 'customers'. The fact that I found it difficult to dislike a basically unpleasant character said a lot for his performance - though a revelation late on in the play showed that maybe he had a heart after all. Lynn Cowley drew all the comedy possible from Johnnypateenmike's Mammy. Well done.

I was also very impressed by the trio of young people in the company.

Jonas Bal made for a very believable Bartley, a teenage simpleton, whose desire for the latest American sweets is foiled by Aunt Eileen's 'habit. I loved seeing his disappointment. Sister Slippery Helen - rough and ready in more ways than one - was played with huge confidence, skill and enthusiasm by Clare Primrose. And Joe Deakin - with so much to do throughout the play - was great as the eponymous Billy.

Accents were good and consistent. I suspect rhythm is very important for the humour in this play and sometimes it slowed a little. Something that will no doubt improve as the run progresses.

Costumes were very accurate and realistic and the set, combining the aunts' shop and the seashore, worked very well, as did using the actors to carry out scene changes. Lighting and sound were just right.

Chrissie Garrett, the play's director, notes in the programme that she adopted 'an inclusive, consensual approach to the direction' (coincidentally I had seen the RSC's Miss Littlewood that afternoon!) and it certainly worked - a lovely ensemble piece.

Finally, the musical links between scenes as well as pre-show and interval music were provided by musicians Dave Lovick, James Plester and John Wright. Even before the play started we knew exactly where we would be!

This was an excellent night's entertainment.

