

AT THE THEATER WITH
John Heilpern



One Man, Four Shows, Three and a Half Raves

A while ago, I was in a pub in Dublin and a local guy, making conversation, turned to me and said, "What do you do for a living?"

I replied that I was a journalist, for anyone can be a critic. "I'm a journalist, sir!"

"Maybe so, sir!" he said. "But are you any good?"

It was modesty, of course, that prevented me from responding to his question as forthrightly as honesty requires. But it seems to me that in the current mini-invasion of these wizar-ards known as the new Irish dramatists, the one big question not being asked is, "Are they any good?"

If you're Irish, you are therefore seen to be not only a born storyteller, but a great one! You will be acclaimed everywhere, except possibly in discerning Ireland. Even so, I've expressed more than a few reservations about Martin McDonagh's acclaimed *Beauty Queen of Leenane*, with its gothic blood and thunder and creaky plot devices. ("Don't forget to deliver the letter to Maureen. If there's one thing you must do, don't forget to give the letter to Maureen. Don't you be forgetting now...")

Conor McPherson's *St. Nicholas* at Primary Stages, with that wonderful Scottish actor Brian Cox, could, perhaps, have been conjured up only by an Irishman. Mr. McPherson, a 26-year-old Dubliner, relishes the telling of stories. His current London hit, *The Weir*, is about ghost stories told by the habits of an Irish pub. *St. Nicholas* (which has been extended through April 25) is about—of all people!—a burnt-out critic and vampires.

All storytellers are happy con men and monologists. "*St. Nicholas* is a play performed by one actor." Mr. McPherson has written, "He only plays one character and he doesn't act anything out. He just tells us a story. And for me, that's full of mischief." Too much mischief? You have the impression that this talented young dramatist is throwing us teasing curveballs to keep our interest from flagging round the warm glow of the fireside, or stage. Put it this way: Mr. McPherson is good. But do we believe his story?

I was with him all the way until the vampires. *St. Nicholas* is a tall tale about a cynical, self-hating drama critic who's smitten by a young actress in a bad production of *Salome*. That's a great start! And every drama critic watching the drama critic on stage is surely thinking, "I know that man. But he isn't me." Mr. McPherson's desperate critic follows the actress to London on a drunken odyssey in search of a story of his own (or some incoherent life of his own). He finds himself procuring victims for a house full of vampires—and that's an unbelievably grand lie if ever there was one. The theater critic and fallen hero of the story doesn't believe in anything, including theater. Why does he suddenly believe in vampires—and cozy suburban vampires at that? Why should we?

It's a stretch. Brian Cox—who I last saw howling into the wind as King Lear in Delbo-

rah Warner's production at the National Theater—is so commandingly good, he almost has us believing it. As the empty vessel of a critic, he has the gift of seeming to be both emotionally dead and utterly alive simultaneously. Contempt is his character's oxygen. (Salvation his last hope.) Actors rarely look you in the eye. They pretend to, peering instead at your forehead. It's more comfortable that way. Mr. Cox is one of the very few actors who dares to look you squarely and nakedly in the eye—daring you to disbelieve his story. This assured virtuoso British actor possesses the heft and voice—the *voice*—that can swoop gleefully on a morsel of spooky narra-

tion of the lost.

Mr. Hoch performs as himself only once—and, endearingly, he isn't as good as himself. Who, we wonder then, is Danny Hoch? But his story about how he was fired as a guest performer on *Seinfeld* tells us a great deal about him (and about that dope Jerry Seinfeld). He was supposed to play a "typical" swimming pool attendant with a Spanish accent named Ramon, but found he couldn't face it. When the moment came, he just couldn't face selling out. The offended Jerry Seinfeld didn't get it at all. "They didn't want the real thing," Mr. Hoch explained to us. "They wanted somebody who could do the real thing and still be one of them."

It might not be too good for his bank balance, but we're awfully glad he isn't one of them. Mr. Hoch's show is about young people. He makes 50 seats available each night to youngsters at \$10 a ticket. The night I attended the show, the studio space was packed with young people who in turn represented a very welcome cross-section of New York. At grass-roots level, Mr. Hoch, the white boy from Queens, is taking theater in exactly the multiracial, direction that is its future. His brilliant work has little or nothing in common with that other storyteller from the melting pot, John Leguizamo. The hyper



Danny Hoch, an urban griot, picks his stories from the margins of melting-pot America in his latest piece, *Jails, Hospitals and Hip-Hop*, at PS 122 through April 18.

Mr. Leguizamo's tribal autobiography in the hit Broadway one-man show, *Freaky*, includes jokes, for one thing. He tells the tale of his dad reading him the bedtime story of "Red Riding Hood." "And she lived happily ever after. Now go to fuck asleep!"

But, again, there's been a remarkable transformation in the audience. The producer of *Freaky*, Gregory Mosher (formerly boss of Lincoln Center Theater), has insisted that one-third of the Cort Theater—some 300 seats—be put on sale each night for \$17.50 and less. That's a great bargain, which has brought the average age of this audience down to 31 years old, from a Broadway average of 102. And Mr. Leguizamo is playing to capacity.

Messrs. Hoch, Leguizamo and Cox are all good deals and good guys. But I can't close without mentioning my favorite transvestite on earth, the one and only Eddie Izzard. His solo performance, *Dress to Kill*, at the Westbeth Theater Center in the West Village, is the hilariously surreal tonic we've come to expect from the cherub in the charming *chinois* tunic. There's no one like him, either. (And his show is also a virtual sellout.) The story that had me on the floor with laughter was his insane riff on how Engelbert Humperdinck got his name.

Did they originally think of Ringelbert Hempledunk? Or was it Geldebert Hingledink? Then, for some reason, Eddie decided to gravely inform us that he had just learned that very evening that Engelbert Humperdinck was dead. Well, naturally, there was a bit of a hush. But then he smiled, and said, "Nah. It's a joke. It isn't true." And then he said, "Actually, it's true. He's dead!" And then he said, "I'm kidding!" And then he said, "I'm not really...!"

For some mysterious reason, the routine tickled us all. He had us laughing so hard that I was just about able to count the number of times he repeated the "He's dead/alive" story. It was 26. Conor McPherson of *St. Nicholas* likes to say that a good lie makes a good story. But I can say that I've seen Eddie Izzard tell the same lie 26 times in about three minutes and have us believe it every time. That's some achievement, and that's no lie.

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