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THEATER REVIEWS | THEATER REVIEW

Solace in a Sea of Insanity

Airswimming | Off Broadway, Play | Irish Repertory Theatre, 132 W. 22nd St. | 212-727-2737

By ANITA GATES JAN. 27, 2013

Clearly they have movie nights at St. Dymphna Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

That is the only way one of the heroines of Charlotte Jones's "Airswimming" could have been committed in 1924 England and find herself obsessed with Doris Day more than three decades later. Persephone (Rachel Pickup) just can't stop singing numbers like "Que Sera, Sera" and praising Ms. Day's many fine qualities.

This modestly staged but impressively acted Irish Repertory Theater production, in association with the Fallen Angel Theater Company, is the American premiere of this work: a story of two single women who have given birth, are punished with 50 years of institutionalization and build a complex, nourishing sisterhood, which helps them endure.

"We do this polishing duty for one hour each day," Dora (Aedin Moloney) says, explaining that the women's chore time will be their only opportunity to talk. "The rest of the time we shuffle and look crazed. They prefer it that way."

Unlike other depictions of young women in similar situations, including Peter Mullan's 2002 film "The Magdalene Sisters," Ms. Jones's play is not about outrage at the misogyny that led to this horrific practice. That is assumed. "Airswimming,"

which takes its name from a fantasy game, is about the victims' interior lives and the human capacity for adaptation and unlikely joy.

The women could hardly be more different. Persephone, the newcomer, is a delicate, confused creature who believes she is being released any day now, to make her society debut at the Dorchester in London. Dora is literate, articulate and often acid tongued, with an obsession for women who have cross-dressed their way into military battle. Just ask her about Hannah Snell and the British naval assault on Pondicherry in 1748.

The play, based on a true story, alternates between scenes of Persephone and Dora's first days together and their later years, a structure that is confusing at first but ultimately revealing. Some of the exposition is awkward (the characters seem constantly to be asking each other what year it is), but “Airswimming,” nicely directed by John Keating, is poignant, intelligent and at times wickedly funny.

“Airswimming” continues through Sunday at the Irish Repertory Theater, 132 West 22nd Street, Chelsea; (212) 727-2737, irishrep.org.

A version of this review appears in print on January 28, 2013, on page C4 of the New York edition with the headline: Solace In a Sea Of Insanity.

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Off-Broadway Review

Intimate 'Airswimming' Is Heartfelt and Endearing

By Karl Levett | Posted Jan. 13, 2013, 7 p.m.

Airswimming Charlotte Jones

Fallen Angel Theatre Company
The Irish Repertory Theatre theater

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Photo Source: Off-Broadway

"Airswimming", written in 1997, is the inaugural work of British playwright Charlotte Jones, best known for her 2002 "Humble Boy," which was successfully produced in London and New York. This early effort, in its U.S. premiere, is pocket-sized and less ambitious than "Humble Boy," having just two characters, a single set, and some basic props. But shout it from the rooftops: "Airswimming" is a small but sparkling gem that gleams with heartfelt anger, endearing comedy, and an underlying

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Intimate 'Airswimming' Is Heartfelt and Endearing | Backstage

sadness. It is an intimate play demanding an intimate setting, which it has in the Irish Repertory Theatre's downstairs space. It also requires much of its two protagonists, blessed here with wonderfully contrasting performances from Aedin Moloney and Rachel Pickup.

The setting is a hospital for the "criminally insane" in 1920s England. Dora (Moloney) has been placed in incarceration for wishing to dress and live like a man. She is joined by Persephone (Pickup), whose family has moved her there because she bore an illegitimate child. Dora is the down-to-earth realist, while Persephone is an upper-class would-be debutante. "Airswimming" tells how these two women share a room and a life together, each giving support to the other when needed. At first the stalwart Dora must encourage the vulnerable Persephone, who is under the impression that she is only there to convalesce. As the years go on, however, Dora begins to despair, and Persephone must comfort her. In an attempt to survive their endless incarceration, Dora and Persephone adapt alter egos, Dorph and Porph, who regularly enact fantasies. Porph takes on the personification of Doris Day, while Dorph celebrates triumphant historical women, often in the guise of a man.

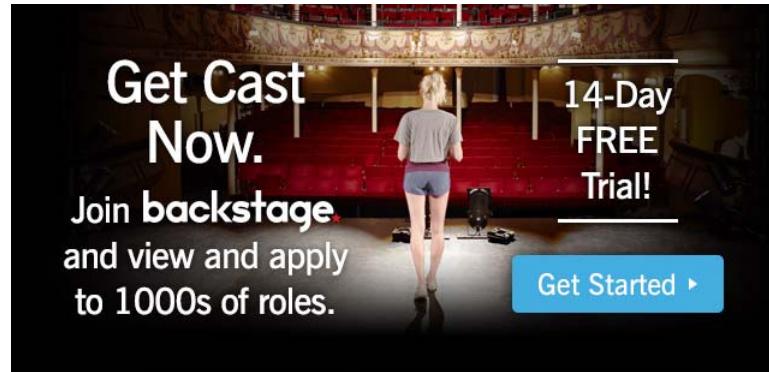
Jones uses shifts in time, backward and forward, to cover the long period of the women's imprisonment (they are not released until the 1970s). She does not shy away from showing moments of madness, but always there is the unspoken thought that the cruel, uncaring system is as much to blame as the women themselves. Through all these years Jones threads a surprising web of comedy. Much fun is had with Porph's obsession with Day and Dorph's stoic tolerance of it. The scene that gives the play its title is one of such originality, charm, and sadness that at the performance attended the audience cheered.

John Keating directs the tricky material with great sensitivity. Moloney's Dora is an appealing combination of common sense and eccentricity, demonstrating a dramatic strength in the play's darker moments. In contrast, Pickup's Persephone has a touching fragility, a wacky comic strain, and finally a loving sympathy.

"Airswimming" may be about forgotten women, but it's not a play that's easy to forget.

Presented by the Irish Repertory Theatre, in association with Fallen Angel Theatre Company, at the Irish Repertory Theatre, 132 W. 22nd St., NYC. Jan. 13–Feb. 3. (212) 727-2737 or www.irishrep.org.

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Theater Review: ‘Airswimming’

By [Diana Barth](#) On January 24, 2013 @ 4:21 am In [Theatre](#) | [No Comments](#)



(L-R) Dora (Aedin Moloney) and Persephone (Rachel Pickup) entertain themselves in poignant ways over the 50 years of incarceration in an institution for the criminally insane. (Carol Rosegg)

NEW YORK—In England in the early 1920s, two women have been incarcerated in an institution for the criminally insane. This U.S. premiere of Charlotte Jones’s delicate and intimate “Airswimming” is produced by The Irish Repertory Theatre in association with Fallen Angels Theatre Company.

Dora’s (Aedin Moloney) great sin is that she likes to dress as a man and smoke cigars. Persephone (Rachel Pickup) has borne a child out of wedlock via an older married man. Her own father, aided by the family doctor, has seen to it that she is put away.

Although the two women are not very much alike, they become strongly supportive of one another. Dora, confined two years earlier, tries to teach Persephone the ropes—not to make trouble that would excite the interest of or interference from the authorities.

In fact, the play is a two-hander; we see the pair making do with a pretty bleak future in the offing. They must do their chores, clean the tub, the floor. Dora is the tougher of the two and takes Persephone under her wing.

Over time, they invent alter egos for themselves. Persephone becomes Porph, while Dora is Dorph. Porph delights herself with memories of movie star Doris Day, singing her praises, even singing her songs, and extolling Day's virtues for having devoted herself to taking care of animals.

Porph dons a Doris Day wig and prances about wearing it. In between these fantasies, the once budding debutante keeps hope alive that her father will soon come for her, and that she will celebrate the elegant party at a fancy hotel that had been promised her. Gradually she faces the fact that he is never coming for her.



(L-R) Rachel Pickup (Persephone) and Aedin Moloney (Dora) in Charlotte Jones's "Airswimming." (Carol Rosegg)

Dorph's greatest interest seems to be in learning the act of trepanning—drilling holes in one's head allegedly to relieve pressure.

Time passes—close to 50 years—and only via bureaucratic doings are they soon to be released. The two have prepared themselves for this long awaited chance by practicing their

self-invented skill of “airswimming,” in which they make swimming movements in midair. The final scene, in which they face the audience and start their ascent outward, is sweet and poignant.

The play, at first seemingly light and even silly, gradually takes on more powerful meaning. Are these women actually insane? It doesn’t seem so. Certainly there is nothing criminal in either their thoughts or deeds. Can such miscarriages of justice still take place? Given the state of things, one unhappily feels that it may be so.

Director John Keating has created a remarkably sensitive ambience, with Moloney, with her curt masculinity, and Pickup, the picture of femininity and vulnerability, appearing ideal for their roles. One could not imagine better.

Melissa Shakun’s set design is appropriately claustrophobic.

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A welcome addition to the Irish Rep’s long list of interesting and unusual theatrical offerings illustrating the Irish and Irish American experience.

Airswimming

The Irish Repertory Theatre

132 West 22nd Street

Tickets: 212-727-2737 or visit www.irishrep.org

Running Time: 1 hour, 30 minutes

Closes: Feb. 3

Diana Barth writes and publishes New Millennium, an art publication.

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REVIEWS

Airswimming

Questions of sanity and self-preservation make Irish Repertory Theatre's two-hander a thoughtful drama worth wrapping your head around.

Zachary Stewart • New York City • Jan 14, 2013



Is "insanity" a tangible thing, or the category for people who fall inconveniently outside the spectrum of what is socially acceptable? The Fallen Angel Theatre Company thoughtfully examines this question in their intimate production of Charlotte Jones'

[Airswimming](#), now running at the Irish Repertory Theatre.

Airswimming follows Dora (Aedin Moloney) and Persephone (Rachel Pickup), two inmates at St. Dymphna's Institution for the Criminally Insane in England, over a fifty-year period, during which the pair has a lot of time to kill. They wash their cell, tell stories, and occasionally go "airswimming," a type of mimed synchronized swimming performed by flapping their arms around the air in their cell. (The effect of the latter bit is a little like watching two four-year-olds play an eccentric



Aedin Moloney and Rachel Pickup in *Airswimming*.

© Carol Rosegg



come on, kids, let's all play



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incarceration today: Dora is a tomboy with a taste for cigars and military history. Persephone sired an illegitimate child from a much older man. (No word on whether or not the gentleman was committed for this offense as well, but one suspects not.)

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While there's more injustice than insanity alluded to in these imprisonments, we find it increasingly difficult to assess the actual sanity of these women as the play progresses. In alternating scenes, Dora and Persephone assume the alter-egos of Dorph and Porph. Porph wears a busted Doris Day wig and believes the film actress to be like the Holy Spirit, always around watching and filling her subjects with her uniquely joyful glow. Dorph, meanwhile, is obsessed with trepanning--the drilling of a hole in one's skull--as a means to alleviate her depression, particularly when Porph is on one of her Doris Day kicks.



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The most fascinating characters in this play, however, are the unseen ones—the nurses, doctors, and family members who have the final say in keeping these women locked up. It is very easy to see how the "airswimming" adventures of Dorph and Porph would suggest they are actually insane, though it's likely these inmates are performing their sideshow to stave off crippling boredom—and so institutionalization becomes a vicious circle which results in two incredibly nonthreatening and gentle women spending half a century locked up.



ding the character a type of
deadpan line deliveries and

stiff posture. Pickup, by contrast, is a girly and wide-eyed Persephone whose character has the most marked difference between her "normal" self and alter ego. That Doris Day wig, which transforms her into Porph, makes all the difference between an uptight daughter of the aristocracy and a happy-go-lucky Calamity Jane who just can't stop singing and smiling. But of course, class means nothing behind bars, and in this institution the two women become equals in their madness.

Designer Melissa Shakun's small and utilitarian set is appropriately stifling in the cozy downstairs space of the Irish Rep, found at the end of a series of twisting and cave-like passageways. Traveling to your seat feels like you're actually wandering into an asylum.

In the end, *Airswimming* is actually a story of friendship (do these women have any other choice?) and co-dependence. Dorph and Porph become inseparable, like two draft horses put out to pasture that still walk next to each other out of habit. It is something relevant to relate to—marriage, or a life of labor in the outside world, isn't really that different, after all.

[Airswimming](#) | [The Irish Rep](#) |

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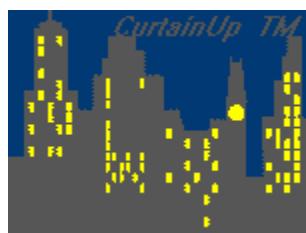
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Rachel Pickup and
Aedin Moloney

(Photo: Carol Rosegg) It is Jones' first play, a humdinger of a vehicle for the two fine actors — Aedin Moloney and Rachel Pickup — who remain an empowering and constant presence throughout. Moloney is the founder of the Fallen Angel Theater Company "committed to presenting the most outstanding and dynamic British plays written by and about women" — is producing this play in association with the Irish Rep.

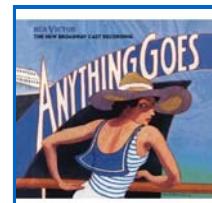
It has been a decade since Jones made a splash at the Manhattan Theater Club with her acclaimed play *Humble Boy*, and then in London and on Broadway authoring the libretto for the short-lived 2005 Andrew Lloyd Webber-David Zippel musical *The Woman in White*. It was a smart decision to confine (no pun intended) this short (seventy-five minutes) compact play to the Irish Reps more intimate space, where director John Keating's sensitive staging brings the relationship of its two characters into sharp relief — giving an edge to a play buoyed more by characterization than by plot.

Jones used "the true story of two women who, forgotten by their families, have been incarcerated in a hospital for the 'criminally insane,'" as the basis for *Airswimming*. Set in London beginning in 1924 and ending in 1972, the play spins in and out of the minds of its two characters Dora/Dorph (Moloney) and Persephone/Porph (Pickup), each learning the art of survival through the creation of a fantasy existence. In each case, it

Like Joan of Arc. Incarceration didn't get her down. She took it like a man. Refused to wear frocks. Had a short crop. They thought it was deviancy. I try to be deviant whenever I can. Vive la deviance." — Dora



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results in the birth of an alter ego.

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Unconventionally funny, without being insensitive to the frightful plight of two women who have been disavowed by their respective families, the play focuses on the times they spend together doing various chores over a period of almost fifty years. Neither has evidently ever been told what wrongdoing has brought them to this place. But adjust they must. They soon begin addressing each other affectionately as Dorph and Porph. At first, the "not so bright" and utterly bewildered Persephone is discomforted by the attention paid to her by Dora who has already acclimated herself since being committed two years earlier.

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Playing with time appears to be as much a part of the playwright's purposefully fragmented narrative as are the various stages of Dora's and Persephone's mental deterioration. It soon becomes quite clear that whatever were their original mental health, it is nothing like the certifiably insane state in which we find them in 1972 as the play comes to its chilling, but also heart-breaking conclusion.

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Irish Rep audiences will recall that Moloney and Pickup appeared together in the recent production of *Dancing at Lughnasa*. I was particularly pleased to see the tall, willowy, almost ethereally graceful Pickup, whom I remember also for her outstanding performance in *Handicapped People In Their Formal Attire* at Premiere Stages in New Jersey, create another unforgettable character. This is not to deny the impact of the gritty and garrulous character played by the shorter-in-stature Moloney. Pickup's Persephone and Moloney's Dora/Dorph are as distinct in their physical types as in their personalities, and not likely to have been either friends or even acquaintances in the outside world. In here, they become sensitized and responsive to the other, forging a touching dependency.

Raised in an upper class family, the twenty-one year old Persephone's crime is having given birth out of wedlock while Dora's crime seems to have been her overtly masculine disposition and nature. Dora's admiration for the great historical and heroic women of history affords her many delightfully instructive digressions. Equally humorous is Persephone's idolization of 1950s film star Doris Day, an opportunity for her to don a blond wig and sing a few more snippets from the Day song-book than Dora cares to hear.

The lack of traditional continuity with regard to the progression of events (not any) and transitions in their personalities (major) is the play's most essential element, but there are aspects of their interdependent, irrevocably entwined relationship that had me a bit confused, including no inference of any sexual intimacy. You have to work hard to think that what you are seeing may have occurred either before or after the scene you are currently watching. Keating's direction commendably affords both actors plenty of room to release their feelings and frustrations through their histrionic bouts as well as in the moments in which they face up to their situation, notably the intelligent Dora's wittily articulated sadness and in the naive Persephone's failure to comprehend what happened.

The play's dramatic device to have time lose its purpose and meaning enables us to see Dora and Persephone obliged to forfeit their previous lives, indeed, their personalities in order to exist in a new world created out of their collective imagining. All of the action takes place in the green tile and cement walled utility room in the institution. Designer Melissa Sakun's

bleak setting includes a tub, mops and brushes, a couple of benches, one cloudy window and a small print of a saint (Saint Dymphna) on the back wall.

Not seen as much as examples of severe personality disorder brought upon by their decades-long ordeal, the action rather explores their emotional dependency. Their alter egos unwittingly become for them a last-ditch, life-supporting escape mechanism, just like the coordinated pretend swimming they do together. The result is an entirely fabricated reality — just like theater.

Airswimming

By Charlotte Jones Directed by John Keating

Cast: Aedin Moloney (Dora/Dorph), Rachel Pickup (Persephone/Porph

Set Design: Melissa Shakun

Lighting Design: Jessica M. Burgess

Sound Design: Korney Barber

Running Time: 1 hour 15 minutes no intermission

The Irish Repertory Company's W. Scott McLucas Studio Theater, 132 West 22nd Street

212-727-2737

Tickets: \$45.00

Performances: Wednesdays at 3pm and 8pm; Thursdays at 7pm; Fridays at 8pm; Saturdays at 3pm and 8pm; and Sundays at 3pm

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Review by Simon Saltzman based on performance 01/11/13

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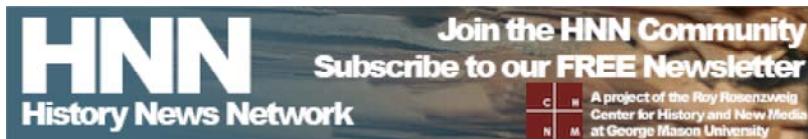
The Tragedy of Involuntary Commitment

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by Bruce Chadwick

1-15-13



Bruce Chadwick lectures on history and film at Rutgers University in New Jersey. He also teaches writing at New Jersey City University. He holds his PhD from Rutgers and was a former editor for the New York Daily News. Mr. Chadwick can be reached at bchadwick@njcu.edu.

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Airswimming is a jolting shocker about two women incarcerated in a mental hospital in England for fifty years due to their eccentricity and because they violated British society's rules of conduct during the 1920s. At the same time, Charlotte Jones's 1997 play is an enduring, enchanting story of the strength of the human spirit and how two people's friendship helped them survive a living hell.

In 1922, Dora (played by Aedin Moloney) was tossed into St. Dymphnas Hospital for the Criminally Insane and followed there two years later by Persephone. They mark the first few years of their imprisonment, but so many years go by they lose count. The hospital has teamed them up to clean the bathrooms one hour each day, and that is the time we see them on stage. There, scrubbing down the bathtub, the pair realizes that they need each other to survive the Hades they occupy.

Ever so slowly, we learn why they are incarcerated at St. Dymphnas for so many years. Persephone, a tall, blonde, and flighty high-society debutante (played by Rachel Pickup) had a baby out of wedlock and shamed her family. When she was admitted, she was classified as a "moral imbecile." Dora lost her three brothers in World War I and then started wearing men's clothes, smoking cigars and pretended that she was a man in their regiment. Her shaken family had her committed. The pair remained at St. Dymphnas, scrubbing the floors and counting off the years in their head.

To keep their sanity, the women become close friends. They create a world of their own amidst the bathrooms, corridors and dormitories of the hospital. They can't go swimming, so they invent "air swimming," pretending they are swimming as they move their arms and legs in the air. They read books about how to drill holes in their heads to relieve pressure and make them happier. They adopt Doris Day as their patron saint and sing and dance to her songs, topped by her hit *Que Sera Sera*. Persephone

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becomes such a fan that she even has someone bring her a blonde wig so that she can look like Day (she doesn't).

The astonishing aspect of the play is that neither of their families ever tried to get them out. They were both a little bit "off" in 1920s England, and so they belonged locked away in a hospital. In that sense, *Airswimming* is reminiscent of the Irish play *Magdalen*, which was about similar practices in Ireland.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the inherent tragedy of *Airswimming*, the play is very funny.. Playwright Jones has written some very humorous scenes, many revolving around Doris Day, and the two inmates make pretty good comediennes.

Still, the play is not without weaknesses. Playwright Jones doesn't provide much context about British mental hospitals and the laws concerning committing patients.

Nevertheless, Jones has written a grim, yet funny, and oft-stunning small play, directed in this staging with great care by John Keating.

By the end of the play, the duo, by now well into their seventies, are released into the world, but to what?

PRODUCTION: Produced by the Irish Repertory Theatre and the Fallen Angel Theater Company.
Sets: Melissa Shakun; **Lighting:** Jessica Burgess;
Sound: Kortney Barber. The play is directed by John Keating.



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A Story About Everyone

Gwen Orel Reviews 'Airswimming' - presented by Irish Repertory Theatre in association with Fallen Angel Theatre Company, Inc.

Company. It's what helps human beings bear the journey from the cradle to the grave while they wait for Godot, or something. So says Samuel Beckett.

So says Charlotte Jones, in her fine, haunting play Airswimming.

The U.S. premiere of the 1997 play, Jones' first, is presented by Irish Repertory Theatre in association with Fallen Angel Theatre Company, Inc., opened on Sunday night and runs through February 3rd.

In Airswimming, two women, strangers who are not at first inclined to be friends, find in each other their only reason to go on.

In their case they are waiting to be let out of an asylum for the criminally insane in 1920's England, where their families have placed them as "moral imbeciles."

Just when you think you've seen the last of these types of stories, such as those of the Magdalene Laundries, here comes another.

But as directed by John Keating, the two-hander starring Aedin Moloney, who is also the producer and artistic director of the company, and Rachel Pickup, there are a lot of laughs along the way.

Complete in 75 minutes without intermission, it's a simple and intense story with just two actors and one sparse set (Melissa Shakun).

There are so many sweet moments and funny insights that you forget at time that the women are stuck in a sort of limbo. The distraction from the bleakness is not unlike life, maybe.

Or not. The setting is not a conceit of Jones, who zoomed to fame with her play Humbleboy in 2002.

Women really were warehoused, like the eccentric Dora (Moloney) and the fragile Persephone (Pickup), for having women out of wedlock, and left to rot.

Press materials tell us that the story is based on the true story of Miss Kitson and Miss Baker.

Eventually they will be let out, and cared for by the government-this is not a spoiler, it's in every description of the show. But after 50 years, that long and strange life has become what is normal for them.

The play goes from 1924 to 1972, going back and forth in time so that we know early on that the hopes of the sweet Persephone that she's just been sent to "convalesce" are empty.

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Aedin Moloney (Dora) and Rachel Pickup (Persephone) in Charlotte Jones's AIRSWIMMING, directed by John Keating, at the Irish Repertory Theatre (Carol Rosegg)





We know that these two oddballs who are clearly not insane are going to be in St. Dymphna's Hospital for the Criminally Insane for half a century, in Dora's case. Dora arrived two years before Persephone.

The two women are thrown together for an hour every day to scrub the bathtub and stairs.

Dora talks as though they are in an army, either her way of coping or the eccentricity that sent her there. "I shall be your superior officer," she tells the willowy, fragile blonde who's just arrived. "The rest of the time we shuffle, look crazed."

Persephone looks like a wounded swan, a princess in a fairytale. It's a nice visual gag that the fragile Persephone towers over the blustering Dora.

Early on Persephone still believes she will still have a coming-out party at the Dorchester. She's only 21.

It's a shock when in the next scene when she's wearing a short blonde wig, her Doris Day wig, singing and dancing and talking about a question about an actress from the '50s.

She and Dora call each other "Dorf" and "Porf" in the scenes set later. The odd rhyming names feel Beckettian, and we enter into a world of confusing wordplay and oddness sometime in the future.

We watch as the 20s turn to the 30s, as Dora begins to lose her bravado and Persephone begins to talk faster and confuse her memories as the years of abandonment take her away from the moorings of reality.

Her backstory includes an affair with a married man, a baby who is taken away and her father bringing her to St. Dymphna's.

Dora's story is more confused; she talks of being accused of being a witch, of smoking cigars, and later of bastards herself.

The two women practice "airswimming," synchronized swimming through the air instead of in a pool, in dancelike moves that show all the life, yearning and beauty they maintain throughout their thwarted lives.

Gradually Persephone becomes almost like Dora's child, begging for a cat from a wry, long-suffering Dora who changes the subject to distract her flighty charge.

Persephone also becomes completely obsessed with Doris Day, singing her songs and relishing trivia about her.

Dora prides herself on being good with numbers and years, a trait that allows her to tell us the history of Dymphna, the patron saint of the mentally ill, who was raped by her father and starved herself to death.

She loves to talk about women who dressed as men. Dora also tells Persephone the history of the goddess she was named for, who was carried off by Hades, and whose mother Demeter made a bargain to have Persephone back for half the year.

"And what did Persephone say?" the younger woman asks. "The story doesn't tell us what she said."

But Charlotte Jones' story does.

John Keating directs with clarity and depth, modulating the abrupt shifts from comedy to pathos skillfully.

Keating keeps the intensity up and shapes the play nicely so that it never becomes too repetitive, despite occasional repetition in the writing as we shift back and forth in time and go from scene in the past to scene about Doris Day again.

Seemingly much stronger than Persephone, as Dora, Moloney shows a heartbreakingly vulnerable under the martial swagger.

Her understanding of her predicament makes it that much more agonizing. She's also very funny when she deadpans. Pickup beautifully matches her.

Her Persephone appeals to the heart, then copes with an awful reality by swimming into a lunacy that is close to the pools of madness. She's high-spirited, and stronger than even she realizes.

This is the best outing yet from Fallen Angel Theatre Company, whose mission is to present outstanding new Irish and British plays by and about women.

Airswimming is the story of two women who find their only solace and hope is in one another. It's not about women at all: it's about everyone.

It's been here for 65 million years.



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Theatre / By Orla O'Sullivan

"Airswimming" * Written by Charlotte Jones * Directed by John Keating * Starring Aedín Moloney and Rachel Pickup * The Fallen Angel Company at the Irish Repertory Theatre, 132 West 22nd St., NYC * Playing Wednesdays through Sundays, extended through Feb. 17 * Contact: 212-727-2737 or online at www.irishrep.org.

How is it possible not to be submerged by the most depressing life circumstances? asks "Airswimming," which opened at the Irish Repertory Theatre on Sunday.

"Mummy said you must never say never," chirps Persephone (Rachel Pickup) one of the play's two characters, adding plaintively, "but you can imagine never in here. I'll never dance again—the weight of it all kills me!"

"Here" is a mental asylum and Persephone and her cellmate, Dora (Aedín Moloney) find themselves there because they had children outside of wedlock in 1920s England.

This was the era of the Magdalene laundries, state-sanctioned, clergy-run workhouses for "fallen women," previously fictionalized in an Irish context in the play "Eclipsed" and the 2002 film "The Magdalene Sisters."

"Airswimming" focuses on the coping mechanisms two completely opposite types of women use to rise up when dragged down to the emotional deep.

One is swimming. Since they never leave their cell—at least within the 75-minute confines of the play—this is all mime, or airswimming. And it is synchronized swimming, now that this odd couple has acclimated to each other after years of close confinement. The play was inspired by a true story.

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Dora is a repressed, dry-witted, intelligent lesbian, probably lower middle class. Persephone is a flighty, upper-crust beautiful blonde with wit to match the stereotype. Her heroine later on is Doris Day; Dora's is Joan of Arc, together with a whole succession of women who went into battle.

One wonders how Dora wound up conceiving, though incest is mentioned in the play. Persephone's story parallels her namesake from Greek mythology, who was taken by Hades, God of the underworld. Her father had her locked away after she was impregnated by one of his friends, a man 30 years this ingénue's senior.

The play opens with Persephone's arrival to the asylum in 1924. She condescends to the inmate she finds, repeatedly distinguishing between herself and Dora and emphasizing that she is merely passing through. It ends in 1972, by which time she is inseparable from Dora.

The scenes move very well back and forward in time to show Persephone's transformation from denial to resignation and assimilation.

Crucially, she and Dora indulge each other's fantasies, the coping mechanisms that keep them almost sane.

In a beautiful scene, Persephone imagines herself at a ball, "I'm in a full-length shimmering gown, hair-up, a handheld, diamante cigarette holder..." Dora, stumped, cannot go there. Persephone enters her world. "Oh, come on Dora! What regiment?"

Both actresses are very credible characters and the isolation of their world—or partially overlapping Venn-diagram worlds—is palpable.

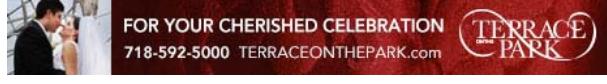
Kortney Barber's sound design adds the evocative touch of regularly played footsteps echoing on hard surfaces, footsteps that won't stop at this cell, and instantly echo familiar prison or courthouse scenes.

What feels less solid is the broader context. How are the inmates so au fait with the outside world when no engagement is suggested?

Playwright Charlotte Jones seems not to have quite the ear for period-piece language that, say, fellow Briton Julian Fellowes of "Downton Abbey" fame has. Speech patterns in "Airswimming," her first play, feel at times too contemporary for the 1920s. Dora uses modern-sounding slang (for example, "carpet muncher") well before the 1970s and Persephone talks quite early on of the Doris Day Pet Foundation, which wasn't established until six years after the play is supposed to end.

Still, "Airswimming" is a quirky, moving, funny and provocative play. And it has lovely singing. Persephone's convincing Doris Day impersonations that grate on Dora are both soothing and sinister, as the lyrics successively speak the unspeakable, from "Que Sera, Sera" on to "Once, I Had a Secret Love."

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