

the fab marquee

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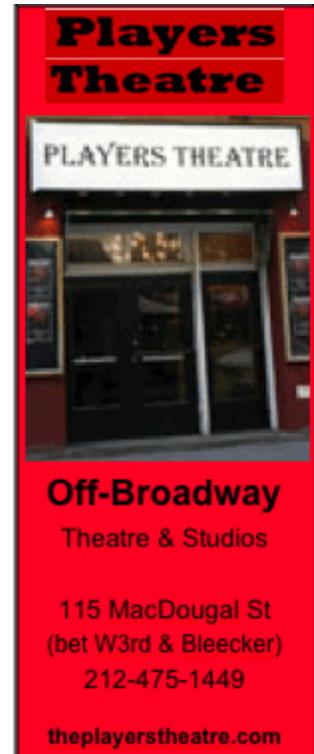
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Friday, September 18, 2009

Review- Cell (1st Irish)

The Fab Marquee review by *Karen Tortora-Lee*.

"I hear you sit right on the stage with the actors," one woman said to those of us gathered in the Gene Frankel lobby, waiting to take our seats for Paula Meehan's *Cell*. "You just sit right there in the prison cell like you're part of the show." A man, leaned over and said to me "Prison? I thought this show was going to be about phones". "Really?" I replied, "I thought it was going to be about molecular biology." *Cell*, however, set in a women's prison in Dublin and populated with the disenfranchised women of Ireland is quite different.



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Upon entering the theatre we were all a bit put off at how extremely close the chairs were set up to the performance area - lined up right across from the cell's makeshift table, and next to the spartan prison beds. The more timid among us chose seats in the back row, but even then we

were close enough to see the careful details of Lilia Trenkova's set design. It's very clever putting the audience, as much as possible, inside the cell, because it's uncomfortable, and scary and a bit claustrophobic. It makes you want to get away, it makes you feel exposed and devoid of privacy. You're made to feel as if you're serving your sentence right along with these women, and when that cell door slammed shut you knew which side you were on.

When we first meet the women in the cell it's early morning, frigidly cold, and already hopeless. There's no soothing daylight to gently awaken these inhabitants.

Rather, Martha (played by Laoisa Sexton) and Lila (Laura Knight Keating) are jarred awake by their fellow inmate, "Delo" short for Delores (Aedin Moloney) who is obviously the boss of this little trio and mad as hell that one of her rules (something about a bucket, something about cycles, I'll let you fill in the rest) has been broken. She monitors and delegates every detail of the cell (who does what, when they do it, and how) with an engineer's precision and fiercely guards her power with a hard line of intimidation. She's the boss, and she rules not just with an iron fist, but with a crazy flurry of rage that tornadoes its way around the small space in uncontrolled and unpredictable bursts. When Hurricane Delo calms down her cellmates react like grateful animals; yet cower distrustfully at her demeanor knowing another powerful storm is just moments away. If HBO's OZ had been set in a woman's prison in Dublin there wouldn't have been a man left alive after Delo Roche got done with them. As it stands, it's hard enough to keep the women alive.

Playwright Paula Meehan spares no gritty detail of reality, and director John Keating is right there with her: there is graphic sex, painful abuse of the verbal and physical variety, visible effects of drugs (both the pitiful vacant blankness of too much as well as the doubled over crippling pain of too little) and crudely descriptive language. In Delo she has given us less of a character than an element; this hard, angry woman acts as a force, at times like the pull of gravity around which everything revolves, but at times more like the pull of a black hole -- she'll take all you have and she'll demand more. And when she's done with you... there's nothing left.

Through conversations we find that there was another cellmate, Annie, who went through a cycle of abuse with Delo that lead to her suicide with just three months left on

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her sentence. At the top of the show Lila is well on her way to following Annie into this pit of despair. Martha and Lila may be criminals, but they're no match for the likes of Delo who, at times, seems to find this all a game... something to do while she counts down the hours, swatting at flies the way others swat at flies to see who will break into the most pieces.

Into this mix comes Alice Kane, a murderer (Katherine O'Sullivan). Before she's brought into the cell there's speculation at how tough she will be, having killed someone and all, but when a sweet older woman comes into their cell the group is taken aback. Not knowing quite what to make of her each woman tries to figure out how this new dynamic will change life for them. Unfortunately, despite her willingness to become a mother figure to the girls and take on Delo, she's found herself in a scenario that will just keep cycling. Ultimately, it all ends the way it began - in a tragically sad prison cell.

Each one of the actresses in *Cell* is absolutely brilliant, taking on a different role and tone that keeps this little world in balance. Laura Knight Keating's Lila is movingly haunting as the weakest of the cellmates; we can feel each wave of pain as she's wracked with symptoms of withdrawal. Laoisa Sexton's Martha is a bit more feisty and playful, as much as she can be... she hasn't yet been defeated by Delo and still has something to look forward to. Sexton has perhaps the biggest challenge - going from someone able to cope to someone then thrown into complete despair. Katherine O'Sullivan's Alice has just the right melding of sweet-old-lady-on-a-trumped-up-charge and crazy-old-bat-who-killed-her-neighbor. She plays it just delicately enough that you're left guessing the whole time as to what you should believe about this knife-wielding, blanket knitting grandma. But without a doubt, it is Aedin Moloney who is completely fascinating as Delo. Her performance is gripping and her energy will have you watching her even when she's not speaking.

Luckily you don't have to commit a crime to be sent to this *Cell*; it runs through the 20th so catch it before its sentence is up.

Fallen Angel Theatre Company and 1st Irish Theatre
Festival present
Cell
Sept 8-20, 2009
The Gene Frankel Theatre