

11 Lynd Close, Selston, Nottinghamshire, HG16 6RN. UK



Triskellion

Irish Theatre and Concert Productions

## Angela's Ashes a Musical? it works.

(Review from the premiere – Gerry Molumby)

I got a ten day notice of the pending premiere of *Angela's Ashes a Musical* and as it was happening at one of my local theatres ,I said to my wife “ I am going to see that”, to which she replied “ That should be a barrel of laughs” !. The irony was not lost on me as there is an ongoing ‘rain’ or ‘damp’ reference when you mention Angela's Ashes. I am going to keep my review to the theatre production; which like the book and the film chronicles the Pulitzer Prize winning memoir of Frank McCourt,. Born in Depression-era Brooklyn to recent Irish immigrants and raised in the slums of Limerick, Ireland. Frank's mother, Angela, has no money to feed the children since Frank's father, Malachy, rarely works, and when he does he drinks his wages or dole money. Frank endures poverty, near-starvation and the cruelty of relatives and teachers -yet lives to tell his tale with eloquence, exuberance and remarkable forgiveness. The enduring bi line of Angela's Ashes is the following quote! :

*"When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I managed to survive at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood, worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood."*

This line delivered by the narrator in the opening scene of the musical received from the audience the comical response it deserved. Here I immediately thought of Seán O'Casey and John B Keane who likewise used their tragic/comical writing in their plays to entertain their audience; but yet make an impact on the seriousness behind the words. The Limerick of McCourt's childhood was at the peak of guilt ridden Catholic Ireland where human/sexual development was full of sin, guilt, retribution often resulting in exacerbation people's potential for mental health. Add to that years of hand to mouth poverty and no wonder so many followed Joyce and got away as soon as they could. For most the 'port of call' was England but for Frank McCourt it was the US Army and following night school qualifications, a career in teaching. In adulthood he achieved slowly but surely his own human redemption.

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*'Brilliant', 'funny', 'melancholy' and 'brave', are words that can be hung on Frank McCourt's door wherever he is.*

*Malachy McCourt – Frank's Brother.*

The newly refurbished Derby Theatre was the setting for the performance (part of the Westfield shopping complex and part of the University of Derby). The amphitheatre space smelled of new carpet and coming to see a brand new show on Irish poverty again the irony was not lost on me. 'Angela's Ashes', adapted by Paul Hurt was ready to roll..... I got a positive vibe of professionalism - as the stage was 'set' before us .The first thing you notice is the wonderful multi use set; a fixed wooden backdrop of door and windows on each side. With creative use of front and back lighting this 'prop' was effectively used as a slum, a school, a hospital, a pub (essential to any good Irish play!), a manor house and even a train. Front of stage was then free for actors who doubled up as dancers and other characters utilised this space to tell us the story. Slick bringing on and off of other props, movement of actors was very well thought through and directed by Yvonne Hurt. Playing various roles by the 25 + actors and am sure therefore they all felt part of an ensemble performance rather than being a chorus to the main leads. Costumes were slightly reminiscent of 'England at the Time' and would have expected to see a few shawls, shoeless people, head scarfs, pipes, and glasses. The actor who doubled up as the priest- teacher and publican, despite his wonderful characterisations, seeing his brown trousers underneath the priest outfit lacked authenticity; In essence a priest at that time would have worn 'all black'. The accents did become at times 'stage oirish' but I always applaud people for trying, for diction is more important to me. I chuckled a few times when some of the characters when being asked a question that required an affirmative 'It is' responded with 'Tis', a subtle 'nod of the cap' to Frank's second novel of his life in the USA.

The show was very autobiographical with the use of the narrator and I found this really effective as he led us along, with the actors, through this human story. All through the show I was being reminded of a similar format in another musical I had seen. I was into the second half that I realised it was Willie Russell's 'Blood Brothers'.

For me the music was the highlight of the show, delivered either in choral, duo or solo, well done to Adam Howell (Musical Director –Piano and Composer) for this achievement. I am sure he would like to share that performance credit with his orchestra.

*"Coming from an Irish family in Britain myself , when I read Angela's Ashes at the age of fifteen I felt very stirred by Frank McCourt's*

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*touching memoirs of an impoverished childhood in Limerick Ireland and his early adulthood in Brooklyn. The other feature which drew me to the book was the colourful, lyrical language in which it was written. I felt it was crying out to me to be made into a musical”, this, in turn, inspired my song-writing.*

*Adam Howell*

I loved the ballad ‘Sing River Shannon’, so well delivered. If Christy Moore gets his hands and vocal cords on this it will like the river go on and on for ever. I also enjoyed the chorus rendition of ‘We’ll be coming Home’ sang at the train station as the men headed off to Coventry (were they being sent!). The solo ‘The Child of Mine’, reached for our tears and some in the audience delivered. In contrast the audience erupted with laughter to the comically parody ‘Irish Dancing Parody’ and ‘Good Catholic Boys’, choreographed (by Michaela Harris).

*Paraphrasing David Mamet (“True and False, Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor”) the job of theatre is ultimately to entertain, whether that be making us laugh, sing, to be enlightened. ‘Angela’s Ashes’ does what it says on the can/programme!*

Why you may ask I am so overall pleased and impressed by this production. I found it very entertaining, confidently delivered, a good example of ‘professional’ and ‘community actors’ working well together; many of the cast are students at the university. Everybody, from front and back stage ‘accredited’ themselves very well. The production by kind permission of Ellen McCourt, Green Peril, and forward written by Malachy McCourt (Frank’s brother) .So much went into these few nights that Angela’s Ashes deserves to be seen by a wider audience in Britain, Ireland (Limerick!) and why not Broadway ,in Frank’s adopted home.

*“Angela’s Ashes a Musical? Tis Done” – Gerry Molumby*

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