

Arlington [a love story]

Leisureland Theatre, Salthill ★★★★★

Enda Walsh specialises in writing the kind of plays that give you anxiety.

The Dublin-born playwright induces a creeping snakes of claustrophobia in his audience, a fear that creeps up the back of your spine even before the play itself begins, from the moment the announcer tells us that audience members cannot leave for the 80-minute duration of the performance, or that, if they do, they will not be permitted re-entry.

If you've seen any of his previous works – from *Disco Pigs* through to *The Walworth Farce*, *Mis-terman* and *Ballyturk* – you'll have some idea of Walsh's core themes.

Characters are trapped in prisons that may be literal and metaphysical. Sometimes they are held captive in big cities and sometimes they are simply locked into the traps of their own minds. There are domineering captors; scared children; accidental visitors who discover they may not leave. Places are rarely named and there's a vagueness about context in general: the audience is made to grow with the characters; learning with them as they learn.

Repetition, routine and ritual are important, because they represent a way to get through the day. But no character is allowed to get comfortable. Interruptions are constant: there are ringing bells, new instructions, sequences of music, sudden disembodied voices. At most, the characters, and Walsh's audience, can hope for a kind of closure via the building of relationships or the sense of calm that comes from acceptance of their lot.

In *Arlington [a love story]*, Walsh moves to vary his theatrical template somewhat, while also delivering a more openly avant-garde piece than some of his previous creations. When we meet Isla (winningly played by Charlie Murphy), she is trapped in a room, which is all fluorescent lights and blank spaces, save for some plastic chairs, a microphone and a fish tank. A 32-year-old attendant (Hugh O'Connor) talks to her from a control room – he can see her on the CCTV – but he is almost as confused about his role in operations as Isla.

He has taken over as her captor, but he doesn't have the same knowledge as his predecessor – and, worse, he seems to like Isla, and appreciate her strength and feistiness. "Am I allowed to get personal?" he frets, but it doesn't matter: he's already falling for her. Their conversation is funny, cute and meaningful: they argue over their favourite biscuits and dogs – although Isla isn't aware there are different kinds of dogs. Having grown up in a kind of jail, her knowledge is limited by the four walls around her. Their story is the opening and closing narrative



Captive AUDIENCE

Enda Walsh and Samuel Beckett grip the crowd at this year's Galway International Arts Festival

Words: **Nadine O'Regan and Sara Keating**



in the play; sandwiched in between is a gorgeous sequence from dancer Oona Doherty.

To music from composer Teho Teardo, Doherty delivers a compelling set-piece that despite being wordless, is powerful. She's, by turns, graceful and jerky – conjuring up pain, pathos, fear and energy, and using her body to convey the language of imprisonment that Isla delivered in the first section of the narrative.

When Doherty disappears, it's hard for the third section of the play to live up to its predecessors. There's a degree of explanation that serves to dilute rather than lift the quality of the work – *Arlington* seems less finessed in this third sequence: your mind starts to wander as the characters slow to their eventual full-stop. Still, the mood and tone of *Arlington* is resonant. It feels unimportant to know the finer details of the prisons Walsh's characters have found themselves inside. In truth, Walsh seems to be documenting an inner landscape of turmoil.

Arlington has humour, but it's grounded in a deep sadness, a kind of grief and struggle for acceptance about the way life is. At times, it seems less like a play than a hybrid work of abstract art, comparable to *The Tree of Life* by Terrence Malick.

You may leave not knowing everything about what it's about, but still feel deeply absorbed in its tensions and jagged rhythms, its palpable, heart-throbbing sense of isolation. As a mood-piece, it's an intriguing and rewarding drama. **NO'R.**

Run ends July 24



Top: Charlie Murphy in *Arlington*

Above: *Invitation To A Journey*

Left: Marty Rea as Vladimir in Druid's production of *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, directed by

celebrity showmen, hoping to make their mark in one of the four roles that Beckett crafted in his play.

This new production from Druid Theatre, directed by Garry Hynes with trademark attention to the psychological landscape of the text, restores a fine balance to the themes of despair and perseverance that drive the play. Designer Francis O'Connor finds room for surprise in Beckett's strict and sparse stage directions. In the intimacy of the Mick Lally Theatre, the claustrophobia of their world is intense, while the high scuffed-white walls underscore how dwarfed they are by this unknowable, meaningless universe.

The performers also find a rich balance between humour and pathos. Marty Rea and Aaron Monaghan as Didi and Gogo channel Laurel and Hardy; one tall, skinny and upright as an umbrella, the other