



Family favourites: Brendan Gleeson and his sons Domhnall and Brian

Gleesons take you on a rollercoaster of sobering lows and hilarious highs

by **Kate O'Hara**

The Walworth Farce

Verdict: Eye-wateringly funny ★★★★★☆

IMAGINED on hearing a vague storyline of *The Walworth Farce* that it may be a precursor to what would happen if myself and my theatre college friends moved to London and tried to make it as actors — grotty flats, living off cheap pulses and gradually acquiring a smorgasbord of wigs, Velcro and fabric samples in our actor's play area that the great director Peter Brook called 'The empty space'.

Cabin fever, resulting from being cooped up, would quickly set in and the characters we would create in the living room from boredom would blur the lines with our real selves.

A rehearsal can take place anywhere and everywhere and, as Brook himself says, 'A stage space has two rules — 1) Anything can happen and 2) Something must happen.'

Plenty, to say the least, happens in Landmark Productions' revival of Enda Walsh's *The Walworth Farce* at the Olympia, a physical comedy that dives so quickly into its cartoonish core you think you have been hit with an Acme mallet and blue birds are flying around your head.

One-time actor and Corkman Dinny (Brendan Gleeson) and his sons Blake (Domhnall Gleeson) and Sean (Brian Gleeson) have lived inside a world of re-enactments and mime in their tinkering workshop of a flat — Blake in particular consigned to the female characters.

It is an immediate and raucous Irish world we are brought into, complete with professional widows, chancers and sly dogs, done with such bursting vigour and one-liners such as, 'Who in the name of the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makim was that?', that there is simply no time for background analysis — a clever move on behalf of director Sean Feeney with Walsh's original script and the unrivalled chemistry of the Gleesons.

The characters' lives unfold on a fairground of staging; caricatures are hall-of-mirrors grotesque, one-upmanship abounds like the circus strongman, even the Gleesons are an occasional triple whammy of that other Machiavellian redhead, *The Simpsons'* Sideshow Bob.

And like fairground games, as soon as Dinny inserts another coin, play is pressed and it starts on a loop all over

again. Until the cycle is interrupted. In no bad way, it takes some time before you are invited to work out what is going on, thanks to the arrival of an outsider, Hayley (Leona Allen).

A perky checkout girl who at first is amused, then deeply disturbed, by this world of hairpieces and mute posturing, they are equally stunted trying to interact as themselves with another human.

Ms Allen, in her first major role, manages this tricky entrance into their world without breaking the suspended disbelief. Sean has a soft spot for her, seeing her on his daily shopping visits to buy the same food for the ever-exhausted story they stage, of why their father decided to leave Ireland 20 years before and his sons followed. Forced to re-live the journey and knowing no other way of living, Blake says to his brother, 'This story we play is everything.'

THE play is many things all at once — Walsh's writing having both the dark underbelly of the McDonagh brothers and the gombeen slapstick of Flann O'Brien. All three Gleesons are eye-wateringly funny and the energy never slips.

In an interview, they revealed they drove their poor mother mad with rehearsing in the family home. This claustrophobia is infectious, even on such a large stage, which can be felt halfway down the back.

It is no longer an empty space, but one that is filled with high-jinxes, mischief, sadness, madness, menace, regret and longing.

The decaying set looked like one of the most fun to build I have ever seen, and the genius array of props include a giant sausage, a dog on a stick and a couple of cardboard coffins on chairs. Worth noting also is a highly amusing safety announcement. The two hours — plus interval — fly by.

In the words of Bette Davis in that other fading-actor comedy, *All About Eve*, 'Fasten your seatbelts, we're in for a bumpy ride...'

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