

# THEATRE

## Festival offers two triumphant tragedies

**GIAF gets off to a triumphant start writes Emer O'Kelly**

**Woyzeck in Winter**  
Black Box, Galway

**Crestfall**  
Mick Lally Theatre, Galway

**T**HE private soldier Woyzeck is shaving his captain; the captain, pugnacious and patronising, is expounding on the nature of and requirement for virtue. And the soldier, not yet cowed, but teetering on the edge of insanity, replies: "You must be warm to be virtuous, sir." But Woyzeck is not warm, and privation has skewed his sense of morality into a frenzy of savage emotional survival.

The poor do not inherit the earth, and Woyzeck knows it. Just as free thinking is inextricably linked to having a full stomach, and authority figures have always encouraged the meek to remain in subjection by keeping them hungry, desperation drives the disempowered to mindless brutality.

Woyzeck's breaking point comes when his beautiful lover betrays him with the bombastic drum-major who so easily entices her with the gift of a tawdry piece of jewellery. Woyzeck can't even afford that: he cannot even feed her and their child adequately. His solution is as bloody as it seems necessary to him: he takes her out and slashes her throat. The ghastliness of the morality tale would be profound delivered in dialogue. But given life within Schubert's sublime *Winterreise* song cycle, with modern-day lyrics by Stephen Clark drawn from Wilhelm Muller's originals, in themselves drawn from George Buchner's play *Woyzeck*... itself written shortly before the author's death at the age of 23... *Woyzeck in Winter* is more akin to opera than play, and all the better



Above: Camille O'Sullivan and Rory Nolan in 'Woyzeck in Winter'  
Right: Siobhan Cullen, Kate Stanley Brennan and Amy McElhatton in 'Crestfall'

for it. Its grandiose melodrama is sweepingly harnessed and adapted into a searing whole by director Conall Morrison, who makes its horror as seemingly mundane as it is tragic.

In premiering it as a Festival production in co-operation with Landmark, Galway International Arts Festival has assured an immediate international audience, and it is already due to transfer to the Barbican in September and to the Dublin Theatre Festival in October.

Patrick O'Kane seems born to play the tortured Woyzeck, his spectacular singing voice combining with the equally spectacular acting talent displayed by Camille O'Sullivan as the treacherous, doomed Marie. With the two leads working as crossover artists, it is a dazzling achievement,



and Stephen Brennan and Barry McGovern as the captain and the doctor who exploits Woyzeck's misery are equally vocally impressive.

Rosaleen Linehan plays the Hurdy-Gurdy Man who "conducts" the tragedy with a surly fervour, and with Conor Linehan expressively at the piano, there is also faultless support from Susannah De Wrixon, Rory Nolan, Shane O'Reilly and Peter Coonan. There is a final star: Jamie Vartan's set of a towering mountain

of battered and broken pianos is nothing less than inspired.

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IT'S nearly 15 years since Garry Hynes directed the first production of Mark O'Rowe's *Crestfall* at the Gate in Dublin. Now her own company, Druid, has revived the piece, with the directorial reins handed over to Annabelle Comyn at the Mick Lally Theatre for the GIAF. (It will transfer to the Peacock stage in

Dublin.) And Comyn's vision of the dystopian world of violence is as terrifying as it is absorbing.

Clint Eastwood painted an entire town red in a movie depiction of hell and vengeance. Comyn and her designer Aedin Cosgrove have done the same thing. A bare flame-red stage, lit into slats that sometimes suggest prison bars, sometimes voyeuristic window blinds, encompasses three barefoot women in coarse cotton smocks: mental patients or prisoners? They are both in O'Rowe's world, their society dead to decency, their world a thing of violence, hatred and vengeance. But they could have loved, O'Rowe suggests...in another time, another place.

Olive (Kate Stanley Brennan) is a prostitute, inured to her trade, but "exempt" from duty because her pimp is her lover and they have a baby son. But the baby has been sired by a customer who is married to Alison (Siobhan Cullen). And Alison, longing for a normality other than violence, is forced to witness her young son dragged into an act of unspeakable cruelty to prove his "manhood"; she knows then that she lives in a world beyond redemption. Meanwhile, Tilly, battered and ill, not even recovered from a botched illegal abortion, is told to get on with the game whatever depraved demands her clients make.

And Tilly (Amy McElhatton) in this version too young to have been forced to witness what she has witnessed, is the catalyst. Not schooled enough in endurance, she breaks, and all three women go down in a hideous denouement. No hope is offered in the midst of the blood and the body parts; only the shadow of despair survives.

Brennan is undoubtedly (devastatingly) dominant in the cast, but Cullen and McElhatton deliver themselves creditably as well.

There is nothing nice about this production: Comyn is unswerving in a monstrous depiction of a world without salvation. But it makes for terrific theatre.