

A rush of blood to their heads

The Abbey's latest production is one glitzy spectacle of a vampire thriller – but is this type of show out of keeping with the Dublin theatre's remit, asks *Fiona Charleton*

Just when you thought a stake had finally been driven through millennials' obsession with vampires, along comes the Abbey Theatre's decidedly peculiar *Let the Right One In*, billed as a "coming-of-age love story" between a vampire and a boy. The Abbey, unlike the Gate Theatre, has never really "done" Christmas shows, but this production does at least feature a sprinkling of snow – albeit even that is stained with blood. Happy holidays! Maybe there's a moral, feelgood subtext? Forget it. This production is all about the grand spectacle. It's the kind of fantastical West End show that, once upon a time, you'd have to go to London to see. Not any more.

Based on the novel and screenplay by the Swedish writer John Ajvide Lindqvist, this is the sixth adaptation staged by the Abbey this year. In fairness, the theatre's output in 2017 has been phenomenal: almost double that of 2016, with 15 plays on the main stage, 20 in the Peacock, and two touring productions. Nevertheless, for a theatre whose historical remit is Irish work, the use of so many adaptations, particularly British touring ones, is a concern. Clearly, the idea of staging a box-office sensation created by John Tiffany, their old National Theatre of Scotland colleague, was too tempting for Abbey directors Graham McLaren and Neil Murray to miss. It suggests a slight anxiety about producing work that isn't already well known. Meanwhile, only the cast is Irish – surely not what the *Waking the Feminists* movement envisaged.

Tiffany has suggested the story, adapted here by Jack Thorne, is a modern-day Peter Pan, but it's much darker. It involves a troubled boy, Oskar (Craig Connolly), who is bullied at school and lonely at home. His separated,



alcoholic mother, played with terrific neediness by Ruth McGill, is flaky and his father is no better. Enter Eli (Katie Honan), a strange girl with a robotic Siri-like voice who has moved in next door with Hakan (a skin-crawling Nick Dunning) who everyone assumes is her father. Wrong. She is a 300-year-old vampire and he is her murderous feeder. In the film, the main roles are played by children. Here, both are unmistakably older, and as Eli's friendship with Oskar blooms, the so-called love story looks unsettlingly like grooming. "I'm not good for you," Eli tells him. No kidding.

The moral centre of this play is tinged as grey as the scenography. While Oskar is bullied by his vicious classmates, the Old Testament-style retributive justice that Eli metes out is no better. How can Oskar ever really be saved if his saviour is worse than his enemies?

The atmosphere is initially established by Christine Jones's chilling and vast forest set. The only prop is a steel climbing frame, but Tiffany's ingenious staging eliminates boundaries, and he transports us wherever he wants with just a lighting change or a new prop. His use of choreography gives the play an otherworldly air, although it sometimes veers dangerously towards awkward.

Ultimately this is a thriller and, as the grisly death toll rises, the inspector (Bob Kelly) turns to the audience and says: "Evil only needs silence. Please don't be silent!" In ways, this production harks back to the days of the Grand Guignol theatre of horror. Shocking images, such as a man being hung upside down with his throat slit, elicit gasps from the audience. The second act features startling special-effect moments, designed by Jeremy Chernwick, that will have you grabbing the person beside you.

Surprisingly, the overall energy level is low and at times the pace flags. It is hard to fault Connolly, who is immensely likeable as Oskar, or Honan, who flits about with feral agility. Kelly is outstanding as the kindly sports coach who slips up. But the tension relies heavily on Chahine Yavroyan's vibey

Bite to greet
Craig Connolly (Oskar) and Katie Honan (Eli), above; Connolly, top right

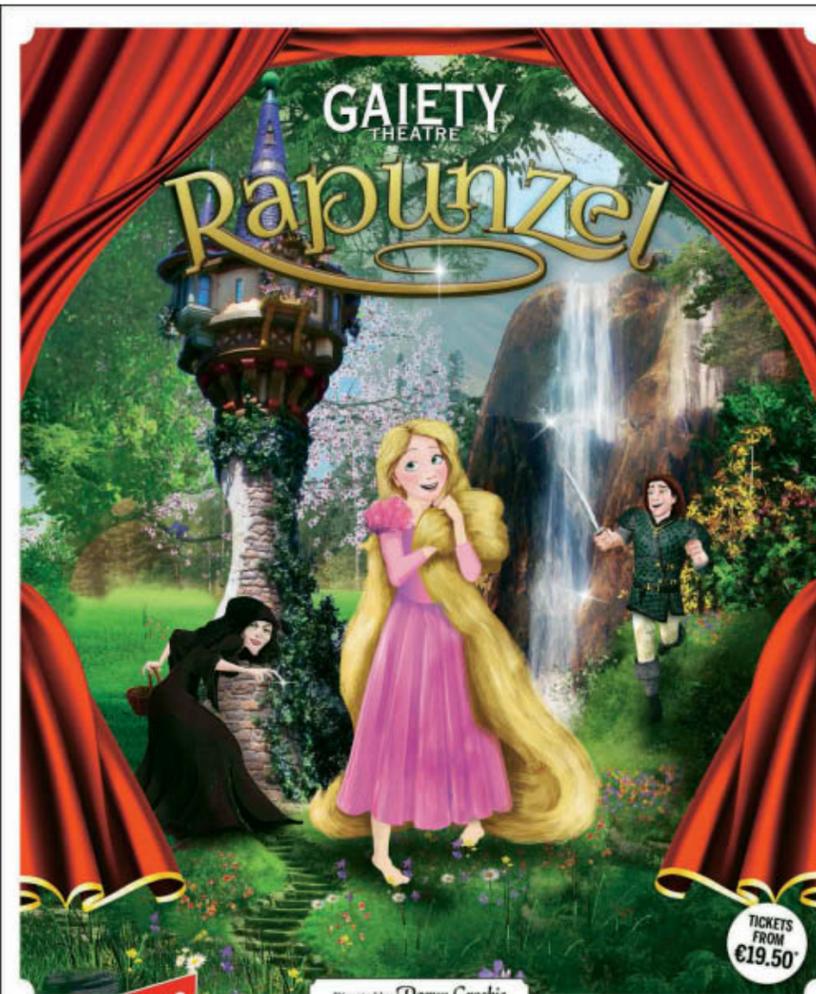


“The moral centre of the play is tinged as grey as the scenography”

lighting design, Olafur Arnalds's hauntingly evocative electro-pop score, and Gareth Fry's slick sound design.

This show is clearly aimed at the Stranger Things generation – my 17-year-old loved it – but should the Abbey be following the fad of glitzy, director-driven productions? If it does, where will it leave Irish writers?

Let the Right One In
Abbey, Dublin ★★★



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THE WONDERFUL EVERYDAY



THEATRE

Marina Carr's powerful and disturbing tale of incest is enhanced by emotional performances and outstanding set design, writes *Fiona Charleton*

"Goodbye Raftery's Hill. I shall not miss you. Goodbye disgusting old kitchen and filthy old stairs. I shall never climb you again," are Marie Mullen's first lines in Marina Carr's anarchic play. In a terrific, darkly funny performance, Mullen plays Shalome, the demented granny trying to escape from the home of her son Red (Lorcan Cranitch). Despite her insanity, she knows that houses can be deadly places – especially for women.

This rarely staged play is Carr's most disturbing work. In a discordant symphony of horror, she explores a world of unimaginable depravity. Written in 2000, when the Galway Races were awash with helicopters, it drills down into the forgotten boglands at Ireland's core. With echoes of sex scandals – the Kilkenny incest case, Ann Lovett and the X case – Carr conjures up a savagery that existed "before laws was made", as Dinah (Maeve Fitzgerald) puts it. The question posed is, can we break the hideous cycle?

Carr has called this her "most Greek play" and perhaps even its name taps into a native tendency towards notions of grandeur. It was on Mount Olympus that Hera and Zeus married and had children, even though they were brother and sister.

The Raftery family are no Greek gods, nor is their hill Olympus. It is a wretched cesspit of farmland in the dark, damp midlands, reflected strikingly by the designer Joanna Parker's waterlogged set. To quote *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, there is "water, water everywhere", and Parker has created an almost mythical, underworld sewer through which the



Wallowing in the mire

Casing the joint Marie Mullen is darkly funny as Shalome

doomed characters slosh, metaphorically drifting, sinking, drowning.

This brilliant design speaks on many levels: it's noisy, unnerving and distinctly Irish. Even the ordinary, Ikea-style kitchen is marooned, surrounded by the putrid mire.

Directed imaginatively by Caitriona McLaughlin, there is a wicked absurdity about the staging, with a ping-pong microwave beside haunting video images of faces suffocating in sludge projected onto the rear wall. This cleverly explodes expectations of realism, shielding us from the grotesque animalism ahead.

At the centre of the story is the patriarch Red Raftery. The vile widower has a nasty habit of roaring "I'm only joking ya. Where's your sense of humour?" when he oversteps the mark, but Cranitch's sensitive portrayal somehow humanises this monster.

He lives with his elderly mother and daughters Dinah, nearly 40, and Sorrel (Zara Devlin), who is 20. His only

son, Ded (Peter Coonan), is so damaged he lives in the cowshed, a gibbering wreck. "I don't know what to do to make you happy," he cries to his bully of a father.

Coonan's emotionally raw portrayal is heart-rending. A grown lump of man, he still misses his mammy, whose absence chillingly haunts the present. Red is supposed to be a farmer, and here too he is a failure. His land stinks with rotting carcasses of animals; decay and contamination are a constant theme.

Carr refuses to judge her characters, preferring to suggest rather than explain. Sorrel is engaged to a local lad, Dara Mood (Kwaku Fortune), so change is imminent. But change is a threat for this family with secrets – terrible secrets. A horrifying cycle of incest has kept the blood line doubly pure. "Don't touch Sorrel," Dinah warns her daddy. "I won't ever, I swear," he lies.

Devlin's portrayal of Sorrel



is deeply touching, as she moves from innocence to tortured misery. Fitzgerald's Dinah is convincing as the daughter/"wife" whose slender frame buckles under her conflicted shame.

Unfortunately the town outsiders, Mood and Isaac Dunn (Peter Gowen), don't provide as much of a contrast – everyday normality – as they should, and at times Carr's guttural, midlands dialect can be difficult to decipher. But Paul Keogan's lighting design and Carl Kennedy's music, particularly the haunting fiddle of Cora Venus Lunny, enthrall.

Ireland still has a culture of denial. Closing ranks and self-delusion are part of our national narrative. "We're a respectable family, we love one another," insists Dinah. Who is she trying to fool? This powerful production speaks to our time. **A**

On Raftery's Hill
Abbey, Dublin ★★★★★

THIS GIRL IS ALL THE RAGE

Gillian Flynn, the *Gone Girl* author, has gone to TV, where her debut *Sharp Objects* promises a little bit of gothic and a whole lot of anger, she tells *Jane Mulherrins*

Crime-writing may be one corner of the publishing world with some gender parity – for every Stieg Larsson, a Ruth Rendell; for every Elmore Leonard, a Patricia Highsmith – but few central characters, bar Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, are female. Gillian Flynn spotted the gaping hole in the market. "What I read in spades were books about men, their rage, self-harm and violence, and what that violence looked like generationally," says the author, whose tense thriller *Gone Girl* was the publishing sensation of 2012 and became a critically acclaimed film, directed by David Fincher. "What I felt was completely absent was anything examining how women process rage."

Her first novel, *Sharp Objects*, a dark and firmly female portrayal of addiction, self-harm and generational violence, was published in 2006. But, with prescient timing, given the outpouring of female rage and resistance uncorked by the #MeToo movement, it is now an HBO mini-series, airing next week.

Starring Amy Adams as Camille Preaker, an alcoholic, self-harming journalist, Patricia Clarkson as her mannered, uptight Southern mother, and the newcomer Eliza Scanlen as her terrifying half-sister, the eight-part production is expected to be the water-cooler topic of the summer.

And not only is 47-year-old Flynn redressing a gender imbalance in protagonists and perps, she is also tearing up the rule book when it comes to the division between the crafts of novel-

and screenwriting.

"With *Gone Girl*, I definitely felt like they were thinking, 'We're going to let you write this first draft, and then you're probably going to go away,'" she recalls with a throaty laugh when we meet in a hotel in Los Angeles. "But David Fincher liked the first draft, so I was on board, and I got a real taste for it."

Dark Places, her second novel, was adapted and directed by Gilles Paquet-Brenner in 2015, and starred Charlize Theron and Nicholas Hoult. It failed, however, to make anything like the impact of *Gone Girl*. Flynn wasn't about to let that happen to *Sharp Objects*.

"It was my first book, and I had a particular communion with it," she says. "Frankly, it was also the one I felt could have gone the most off the rails. It has that dash of gothic in it, and in the wrong hands it could end up campy."

Fortunately, it has ended up in the hands of two of TV's most in-demand creatives: the director Jean-Marc Vallée, of *Big Little Lies* fame, and executive producer Marti Noxon, writer and director of the 2017 film *To the Bone* and this year's black comedy *Dietland*, who co-wrote the script with Flynn.

Set in a corner of the author's native Missouri, where the Midwest meets the South, *Sharp Objects* has a strong sense of place. It feels humid, sticky with sweat and bourbon, and stiff Southern manners mask an undertow of menace. As Adams's character, Camille, notes, it's a place where, "when someone says, 'Bless your heart', what they really mean is, 'F*** you.'"

Flynn had escaped to New York by the time she began to write novels; she was also working on the magazine *Entertainment Weekly*. Yet she had initially set out to be a crime reporter. "I have always been fascinated with violence," she says. "I think people either want to look under the rock, or don't. I've always been, like, 'What is under that rock?' Always."

Yet she discovered, after a month as a crime stringer on a newspaper, that she didn't have the stomach for it. "It turns out I can't do the real stuff, I can't have those true stories in my head," she says with a shrug. Even now, she steers clear of reading up on her subjects when writing. "I do not do research," she says. "But I can imagine things."

She admits, however, that along with imagination, there are autobiographical elements to *Sharp Objects*. "I was living a drunken, not necessarily healthy, Camille type of life," she says of her New York existence in 2006. "I wasn't a cutter or a self-harmer, but I sometimes veered into depression, and I always had a finely honed sense of self-destruction. I think a lot of people do, especially women."

"For the longest time, *Sharp Objects* was just women in a series of rooms, talking about violence and rage," she continues. Then she read *Mystic River*, Dennis Lehane's novel about three men linked by violence in their past. "I suddenly got it," she says. "I could attach it to a mystery, and that was what would give me the engine for the story. I learnt that mysteries are a way for me to talk about all the things I want to talk about." And, contrary to her reputation for finely crafted plot twists, she confesses, "I hate plot. I actually think I'm very bad at plotting. It's my weak spot."

In 2008, she was made redundant at *Entertainment Weekly*. It allowed her to focus on what would become her best-seller. "I probably would have stayed in that job otherwise, and who knows where *Gone Girl* would have ended up," she speculates. "Nick [one of the central characters] certainly wouldn't have been a laid-off pop-culture reporter. I channelled my angst into him."

Her publishers had concerns, however. "They said, 'There are two narrators, they're not likeable, and there's no one to root for. And you know who did it in the middle: the end is vague and trails off.'" Flynn stuck to her guns. "Then it sold more in a week than *Sharp Objects* had in a year."

Today, along with a screenwriting deal with Amazon Studios, her first project for which is an adaptation of the British conspiracy thriller *Utopia*, Flynn has two novels in the pipeline. One, "a big, folkloric tale, an Executioner's Song-type American murder story", is taking a back seat while she focuses on the other, "an angry, angry book, in

response to Donald Trump getting elected – pure feminist rage".

She notes, cheerily: "I don't think I could write a light novel even if I wanted to." The mistress of mystery might be branching out, but she's not leaving the darkness behind any time soon. ■

Sharp Objects, Sky Atlantic, from July 9



Looking under the rock Gillian Flynn, above, on the red carpet

Roddy Doyle's 1980s classic may have dated a little but it still makes for a gripping evening's entertainment, says *Fiona Charleton*

There is a sense of déjà vu watching Roddy Doyle's *The Snapper*, and not just because we remember the hilarious 1993 movie directed by Stephen Frears. While *The Snapper* was wonderfully original back then, today it's been upstaged, literally, by Mrs Brown and her boys. We have unwittingly created a whole new stage-Irish persona: a working-class, big-hearted matriarch or patriarch who enjoys a drink, has a devastating line in self-deprecating humour, might waltz off in a huff but will battle like Cú Chulainn for family honour. So, meet the daddy of them all: Jimmy Rabbitte, played here by Simon Delaney.

It's hard to fill the shoes of Colm Meaney, who had the part of Rabbitte in the movie – delivering the famous line: "I suppose a ride is out of the question?" – but Delaney inhabits the role with belligerent brilliance. In fact, it is difficult to conceive it being played better. The issue is, why turn a much-loved cult classic into a stage farce?

As in the book, Doyle's script wastes no time on preliminaries. "I'm pregnant!" is the opening salvo delivered by 20-year-old Sharon, played by Hazel Clifford with truckloads of attitude. In Irish drama, this announcement is usually drenched in anguish. But Sharon doesn't do anguish. A wonderfully comic character, she brings resilience to a new level.

Apart from a mild grilling from her stunned Da – "Who was it?" and "Will he marry you?" – her parents take the news swimmingly. Asked whether she's going to keep it, Sharon is aghast. "Abortion is murder," she cries, to which her mother (Hilda Fay) demurs half-heartedly. This stilted reference to the recent referendum is the only odd note in an otherwise terrific performance by Fay.



Daddy of all farces

Although Doyle excels in depicting how humour helps us muddle through life, in essence this play is about a girl who had drunken, blackout sex with a predatory, middle-aged man, George Burgess (Simon O'Gorman). Some people might call this rape. Is it really OK to skate over this with comedy? Farce often puts tragic situations back to front, however, and this helter-skelter production leaves no room for introspection. Directed by Róisín McBrinn, it is a supersonic *Back to the Future*-style nostalgia trip and our only option is to go with it; forget #MeToo and slut-shaming. This is the late

THE CRITICS

Eighties – bring on ra-ra skirts, perms, Madonna and Duran Duran. Paul Wills's set design reflects the chaos that is the Rabbitte household.

Scene changes involve props whizzing on and off, and the pace never flags. It's a classic farce design with hidden doors and comedy flip-out surprises (including a toilet). Dominating are three TV screens which, courtesy of video designer Conan McIvor, show everything from Blankety Blank to Rolf Harris, which Rabbitte insists is "good for the kids". Indeed. In a parallel universe the Rabbittes would be Gogglebox gold.

As the story traces the rise and fall of Sharon's abdomen, we meet the urban village that is Barrytown, where the vernacular is as colourful as the set, and one-liners are doled out like Trigger bars. Sharon's brother Darren (Jason Cullen) and her dancing twin sisters (Alannah Browne and Kayleigh Farrelly) create a whirlwind of normality while her girlfriends Jackie (finely played by Kate Gilmore), Mary (Amilia Stewart) and Yvonne (Niamh Branigan) are her cackling foils. But Sharon has

Back to the future The Snapper revels in nostalgia

a problem: Burgess is Yvonne's dad and if her secret is discovered, she's dead.

Despite the big cast, the central father-daughter story is the one that touches. Delaney's father-daughter speech is a welcome moment of calm, and his transformation into a hands-on pregnancy guru is endearing. The comic surprise is O'Gorman, who might steal the show as the pathetic Burgess except that he's got too much competition.

Although I felt I knew the Rabbitte family from the movie/book, this production swims in shallower waters than expected. The central characters come across as a bunch of lovable but one-dimensional caricatures, whose unconditional love magically slays slut-shaming and who bounce back like flattened, run-over cartoon cats. If only.

Even still, this is an entertaining show – one which even pulls a live baby out of the hat. It's a summer fairy tale, Barrytown style. ■

The Snapper
Gate, Dublin ★★★