

“The Seafarer” Reviews



“The Seafarer” may well be Conor McPherson's masterpiece to date...I was enthralled by the much-lauded 2008 Christmas-season production of "The Seafarer" at Steppenwolf that boasted a powerhouse cast, including John Mahoney, Tom Irwin and Francis Guinan. But Matt Miller's staging for Seanachai Theatre Company can proudly stand shoulder-to-shoulder with that ensemble...

[Kevin] Theis' Satan-in-a-suit Mr. Lockhart makes a better fit in some ways with the grungy world of Sharky and Richard than Irwin's self-possessed and L.A.-slick soul-claimer did at Steppenwolf. Theis plays Lockhart with the same hair-trigger temperament and hint of self-loathing that coats all these characters as surely as nicotine and years of assorted filth cling to the walls of Joe Schermoly's claustrophobic set. This paradoxically makes the ending even more believable. The devil is indeed in the details, and in a place where drunken carelessness reigns, the details are bound to get foggy. Even for Lucifer.

"The Seafarer," unlike McPherson's earlier works (including 2001's "Port Authority," now playing at Writers' Theatre) doesn't depend upon long, self-revelatory monologues. Instead, these shattered souls come through in snippets of argumentative dialogue and reminiscence, rendered with nearly perfect timing and nuance by Miller's riveting cast.

Only Mr. Lockhart gets a longish speech, describing hell as a place of complete and total isolation. By contrast, McPherson's world of men locked in what W.H. Auden described in his poem "Atlantis" as "hard liquor, horseplay and noise" seems positively idyllic — a voyage well worth the pain sometimes inflicted by one's fellow travelers to the grave.

- Kerry Reid



In "The Seafarer," it is Christmas Eve and gathered in the basement room of a filthy house is Richard (the masterful Brad Armacost), a serious alcoholic who has lost his sight, and his younger brother, Sharky (Dan Waller, so tightly wound and despairing that you fear for his sanity). Sharky, a haunted man trying to lay off the bottle, has just returned "home" after losing his most recent job as the driver for a wealthy couple.

The siblings have a wholly dysfunctional, passive-aggressive relationship. And things go from bad to worse with the arrival of Nicky (Shane Kenyon), the smarmy hustler who stole Sharky's lover some time ago, and Mr. Lockhart (Kevin Theis), a well-dressed stranger intent on playing a high-stakes poker game. Supplying a bit of comic relief is the brothers' long-time friend, Ivan (Ira Amyx), a hard-drinking husband whose wife has had enough.

It is Sharky's reckoning with the devil that stokes the fire here, with Waller as the tragically lost soul and Theis, chilling in his coldness, supplying McPherson's scorching description of hell. McPherson can go on a bit, but the cast, under the fine direction of Matt Miller, keeps you listening and waiting for some form of redemption.

As they say: Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night. - Hedy Weiss



"Highly Recommended. "The Seafarer is excellent... an outstanding play filled with dark humor and loads of pathos... don't miss!!!"

-Tom Williams



RECOMMENDED

Conor McPherson's 2006 play unfolds in the squalid home of Irish brothers Richard, a petulant drunk who's recently lost his eyesight, and Sharky, a hotheaded drunk who's recently lost his job. They spend Christmas Eve playing poker with neighboring drunks Ivan and Nicky, as well as a suave stranger who turns out to be the devil come to collect Sharky's soul. It may not sound like ideal holiday fare, but McPherson supplies a kind of provisional redemption that feels more earned and far more genuine than what you'll find in most entertainment options this time of year. Matt Miller's fine staging for Seanachai Theatre Company is beautifully acted, particularly by an energetically cranky Brad Armacost as Richard and a touchingly befuddled Ira Amyx as Ivan.



It's Christmas time. Richard plans to spend the holiday blind-stinking drunk... literally. Brad Armacost (Richard) is a boozier who lost his eyesight. No one in Chicago plays a sloshed Irishman more charming than Armacost. In *The Seafarer*, Armacost is hilariously inebriated. A vivid storyteller, Armacost has this marvelous ability to draw the audience in to his drama and turn it into a jocular adventure. He amuses everyone but his brother, played by the stalwart Dan Waller (Sharky).

Conor McPherson penned this Irish tale of going home for the holidays. Sharky has returned to Dublin to help his disabled brother. During his stay, he is visited by unwelcomed guests from his past. They've been invited by Richard for drinks and cards. McPherson's set-ups cackle with back-slapping, shot-swigging, male-fraternizing. These guys are having a good time. Their banter feels like whiskey-soaked spontaneity. In mid fabrication, Armacost viciously goes off on the annoying winos outside. Or Ira Amyx (Ivan) injects an odd comment that is both riotous and bizarre. Or the amicable and clueless Shane Kenyon (Nicky) schmoozes everyone, including his girlfriend's ex. These sudden shifts in party chatter seem the natural outcome of the inebriated. They're slurring their thoughts. Dark comedy gold.

Within this merry-making, McPherson yanks the rug out. He drops an otherworldly twist into this holiday libation. Director Matt Miller paces the tomfoolery with spirited stumbling. **Then, Miller introduces the polished Kevin Theis (Lockhart) in a dramatic pause. The added tension is sobering. Theis effectively kills the party buzz for Waller. The stakes are raised for the card game. And the stone-faced Waller impressively plays his hand.**

I loved *The Seafarer*. The writing, directing and acting are superb. I was keenly aware, especially in Act 1, that often I was the only one laughing at Armacost and Amyx's antics. They are playing pathetic drunks and they are a hoot. I wondered if my Irish ancestry allowed me to better enjoy their shenanigans. I remember the big flop of the movie "Arthur 2" where Hollywood learned laughing at alcoholics wasn't politically correct. Still, I find pissed Irish men amusing. Though I wouldn't want to marry one, onstage they entertain.



RECOMMENDED

The devil sure knows his way around Chicago. Besides the usual mixture of gang violence and Rahm-style politics, Satan has been a feature of many recent stage productions, including his recent stint in The Gift Theatre's "Broadsword." What makes this production different is that, in this play, Lucifer is introduced into a classic Irish gothic play (the type where the characters spend a lot of time talking about leaving the house but instead mostly just drink).

Directed by Matt Miller and written less than a decade ago by Irish playwright Conor McPherson, "Seafarer" presents a world where you can learn a lot about a character by the drink they choose. There is the loud American type (played by Shane Kenyon). He is a Miller guy. The flawed hero of this tale, Sharky (Dan Waller) is taking a break from the booze. His older, blind brother Richard drinks whatever he can get his hands on (and also seems to enjoy reminding

Sharky that he is a lousy drunk). Ivan, their drunk, mutual friend, is also not very discriminating about what he drinks. In fact, much of the first act is spent setting up the sheer wretchedness of the situation as they all prepare for a Christmas Eve get together that culminates in a certain someone coming to play a couple hands of poker and collect on a few debts.

The devil is in the details and I rather like McPherson's idea of him as a powerful but jealous, almost pitiful demon. **Played well by veteran actor Kevin Theis, the devil here is commanding when he needs to be and weak when the script calls for it. Pitted against Satan is the deeply flawed Sharky. Waller puts in just the right amount of vulnerability. The play is at its best when stripped down to just those two actors.**

What surprised me the most about this production were the strong religious undertones. The devil here repeatedly alludes to the holy nature of Christmas. His description of hell, being trapped in a cold grave under the darkest sea where you are always waiting (hoping) to just die, almost made me go straight to temple after the show. And the ending, which I will not ruin, is dripping with redemption. It is as if the "Devil Went Down to Georgia" was reimagined as a sermon. This is a Christmas mass worth attending.