

REVIEWS

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Two Beckett Monologues Half Moon Theatre, Cork

MARY LELAND

Conor Lovett's command of the stage for this Gare St Lazare production of *The End* and *The Calmative* is so apparently effortless as to be relaxing, except that with Samuel Beckett one can never relax. This is a fact which Lovett employs in his treatment of these two prose pieces by chipping out the telling phrase, never over-stressing it but yet presenting its meaning, or its significance or even its contradictions, in a manner which makes them register. With *The End* the result is comedy, sly and biting, all the sharper for seeming to come out of hiding and ascending, or descending depending on one's attitude to Beckett, to actual merriment.

For this monologue on a vagrant's resilient odyssey Lovett remains physically and almost totally in one place yet seems in constant movement, his body leaning forward or back, his head turning sideways, his arms and hands articulate as they express a commentary on a text which, infused with the amiable logic of the alienated, has reminiscences of Flann O'Brien. Written in 1946 and collected in *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, both pieces are meditations on solitariness, of adapting to what is predicted and of looking back, as if clinically researching that adaptation.

In *The End* the theme is an examination of the likeness, that is the simulacrum, of a life and the conundrum of its closure. In *The Calmative* (here receiving its stage premiere) the close has been achieved; this is darker, sadder and more intense although Lovett's fluid and well-projected voice never blunts the incisions of the prose even as he moves companionably among the audience. As usual

with Beckett the obligation is to seek interpretation beyond the prose and beyond the masterful pauses, but director Judy Hegarty Lovett doesn't make a fuss about this. Instead there is a background of voluptuous scarlet velvet drapery, tasselled and immense, against which a shredding bench and a solitary human voice gather us into this passing hour as if life were a dream or a myth of one's own making. At The Project Arts Centre, Dublin April 12-17

Ioana Petcu-Colan (violin) Project Arts Centre, Dublin

MICHAEL DUNGAN

Ian Wilson – Una Santa Oscura

This was the premiere of an onion piece, a multi-disciplinary composition with layers to peel away revealing different things.

The innermost layer is new and thoughtful music for violin and tape by Belfast-born Ian Wilson. The piece's main inspiration – and the next layer of the onion – is the eponymous "obscure saint", Hildegard of Bingen – 12th-century abbess, visionary, composer, scientist, writer, and philosopher. Seven of its 13 short movements have the religious titles "Devotional" and "Visionary", and three more are called "Interlude". The remaining three have narrative titles whose connection to the life of Hildegard is alluded to but not spelt out: "Tirade", "Intense Love", and "Near Death Experience".

More layers: first, that this is Hildegard through the filter of Oliver Sacks – doctor, neurologist and author, who suggested in a 1970 collection of case studies called *Migraine* that her visions were headache-induced – and, second, that this is music theatre. Director Tom Creed and designer Ciarán O'Melia set

the wordless action in a spartan bed-sit that resonates with the abbess's cell.

As the piece opens, the soloist Ioana Petcu-Colan eyes her violin sitting atop the fridge. The tape runs – quiet but not altogether at ease, with electronically manipulated samples, mostly from the violin. She eventually, hesitantly plays an innocent little figure. From that moment all the layers are in train together.

Petcu-Colan is asked to do almost everything and almost nothing. In other words, she alone must carry the whole piece, and yet the staging asks for no great dramatic input. Throughout this spectrum she is commanding, as she is with her instrument, so that the whole, multilayered experience strikes a successful balance between the perplexing and the moving.

Sticks and Stones Bewleys Cafe Theatre, Dublin

PETER CRAWLEY

"It's not as black and white as you think it is," says attorney Alan Klein to his prospective client, a racist cop accused of a hate crime.

First staged in LA not long after the Rodney King riots, Drew McWeeney's and Scott Swan's short 1994 legal drama suggests otherwise, both in concern and schematic simplicity. A sketch about justice and racism in the US, it attempts to give its argument some thorns, but whether it's the heat of its creation or the sensitivities of its audience, they are quickly pruned away. The cop, a seething veteran called Di Palma, played a little timidly by Laurence Lowry, is saddled from the start with the throwaway epithets of a card-carrying bigot. "I can't believe what's



Ioana Petcu-Colan:
commanding

coming out of your mouth," says Owen Mulhall's Jewish lawyer, and the problem is that neither can we. A defiant cop justifying his actions in murky circumstances is one thing; a nationally vilified pariah spilling casual hatred from his introduction is another, and characterisation throughout seems to have been sacrificed on the altar of an issue drama.

There are glimmers here of a more sophisticated play that might have served a complicated theme. A self-aggrandising Klein, seemingly more interested in tabloids and TV cameras than the courtroom, needs the tainted cop as much as Di Palma needs a Jewish lawyer the way everyone in Beverly Hills wants a "spic" gardener. But tension between complicity and morality is sapped away through clunky exposition and unlikely finger-wagging, with the lawyer, unusually, becoming the conscience of the drama.

Mulhall and Lowry are solid presences, but in a play so fixated on race, their characters' own ethnicities register dimly. Dialogue between the pair is batted back and forth like a leisurely tennis rally, and director Les Martin looks for opportunities to enliven proceedings with a sudden yell or a grabbed lapel.

The drama ends with a hand-wringing gesture towards defending the indefensible in a free society. But while racism has hardly disappeared in the years since its debut, the play is most reassuring where it looks most dated. Considering his victim, Di Palma summarises the limits of an African American's opportunities: he wasn't going to cure cancer, he wasn't going to be the next president. After Rodney King, those words seem appalling. After Barack Obama, they seem defeated. Until March 13

■ Aidan Dunne's Visual Art column will return next week