

Stage has been set for a delicious Irish stew of plays

Festival opens tonight at Old Cycle Shop

By Liz Nicholls, Edmonton Journal June 22, 2010



Serca Festival's opening double bill includes Part 2 of the Maggie Now quartet. Above is an image from Maggie Now Part 1 from the 2006 Fringe, starring, clockwise from bottom left, Natasha Mihell, Michael Streat, Michael Cowie, Breena Corner, Mark Henderson, Matt Busby and Kendra Connor. Photograph by: John Lucas, edmontonjournal.com

THEATRE PREVIEW

SERCA FESTIVAL OF IRISH THEATRE

Maggie Now Part 2, Spokesong, The Good Thief, The Lime Tree Bower

Where: Old Cycle Shop, 9351 118th Ave.

Running: Tonight through Sunday

Tickets: Tix on the Square (780-420-1757) or at the door

Full schedule: sercafestival.ca

EDMONTON - The joint gifts of poetry and the gab are everywhere onstage, in the six-day festival that opens tonight in Edmonton's newest theatre venue, the Old Cycle Shop on 118th Avenue.

This is a broad hint that the Serca Festival is Irish. In fact, it's named in honour of the Gaelic word for "love story." Serca is the inspiration of Theatre Prospero, which made its name doing Shakespeare for kids, then created a magical four-part theatrical experience, and succession of Fringe hits, from a tale of the Irish in America -- Betty Smith's funny, poignant novel that chronicles a turn-of-the-century Irish family in Brooklyn. Part 2 of the Maggie Now quartet, ingeniously adapted by Jennifer Spencer, is the second half of Serca's opening double bill.

The festival curtain raiser is *The Lime Tree Bower*, the Edmonton premiere of a 1996 trio of interconnected monologues by one of contemporary theatre's great storytellers and masters of the form, the Irish playwright Conor McPherson. We're introduced to three young, small-town seaside guys, two brothers and the wry, failed academic who's dating their sister. "It's like a pub meeting but in a theatre," says director Amy DeFelice, who brought McPherson's *St. Nicholas* to the stage last season. "The characters always know they have an audience, and at some level, they acknowledge it."

Each character gets a monologue in this atmospheric coming-of-age trilogy. And each is imbued with a slightly different shading of ambiguity. Sex is involved, of course, and so, more improbably, is an attempted robbery that goes hilariously askew. "Their journeys are almost, but not quite, separate," says DeFelice. "Their most important relationship is with the audience."

That would be true, as well, with the protagonist of McPherson's *The Good Thief*, a Dublin hit man whose assignment has gone bad in an escalation of calamities, and whose certainties have therefore been rattled to the bone. Frank Zotter stars in the expert Wayne Paquette production that also ran at the 2008 Fringe.

The fourth Serca offering is a thoroughly eccentric, fascinatingly buoyant play set in the strife-torn Belfast of the 1970s, amid the IRA's response to Bloody Sunday. It's Stewart Parker's *Spokesong*, which finds its metaphor for hope, peace and liberation in ... the bicycle.

Its protagonist, heir to an ancient Belfast bicycle shop once owned by his grandfather, mounts a civic campaign to restore this conveyance to its rightful place as vehicle of choice for a humane civilization. This being Ireland, cars are a deadly invitation to bombers, for one thing. Theatre Prospero's Mark Henderson, who directs, loves the play for "the way it smashes hope and despair together. ... The bike, after all, is a synthesis of the machine and human; that's the miracle of it."

No excuse is necessary, of course, for a celebration of the Irish contribution to our spoken, literary and dramatic culture, as Henderson points out. The bonus: "The combination of art and camaraderie lends itself to a pub in the lobby."

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