

Glenda Frank in New York

Plays by Sean O'Casey (1880 – 1964) have bewildered me. But the current revival of *The Shadow of a Gunman*, helmed by Ciarán O'Reilly (producing director of the off-Broadway Irish Repertory Theatre), is more than just the best O'Casey production I've seen. O'Reilly's directorial clarity pulls the disparate elements and multiple voices (a cast of ten with some doubling) into a compassionate portrait of Irish life in the last years of the War for Independence. I finally understand why the drama is a masterpiece, and why I need to see more O'Casey plays.

The playwright was a complex man. An ardent nationalist in his youth, he studied Gaelic and changed his name from John to Sean – much like the character Seamus Shields (Michael Mellamphy), a once-brilliant student who now sells sundries door to door because there are no jobs. Like Seamus' roommate Donal Davoren (James Russell), O'Casey was a poet before he turned to playwriting. Although *The Shadow of a Gunman* was well received in 1923, later plays were attacked for their perspective on sex, religion, and the Easter Rising of 1916. Several of his plays have anti-war themes.

The Shadow of a Gunman is a satire of Irish braggarts, blowhards, slackers, drunks, wife-abusers, and poets – but a basic decency shines through. The playwright's vision is more problematic when it comes to the Irish Republican Army and war itself. The "gunmen" are both heroes and pariahs, fighting for the people who shun the violence.

When the poet discovers that his neighbours believe he is an IRA gunman in hiding, he scoffs. But as the studio apartment becomes a hub, he doesn't set the throng straight, enjoying the false celebrity. Most are

comical, garrulous prattlers. But when the lovely Minnie Powell (Meg Hennessy) enters, so sincere in her admiration for him and the freedom fighters, he is enchanted. In a moment of quiet attraction, they find each other. As in Shakespeare, the lovers are the centre of the moral universe, a still point against which to measure events. Her simple, eloquent costume (designed by Linda Fisher and David Toser) and the selective lighting by Michael Gottlieb, help her stand out in the crowd scenes.

In Act Two, the violence escalates. Gunshots and explosions punctuate the night. There is a rumour that someone in the building is storing munition. The staging of the raid by the uniformed Black and Tans, from the balcony level down, was done by O'Reilly himself. The audience shares in the neighbours' terror. When Seamus and Donal discover that a friend left ammunition under their bed, Minnie volunteers to take the bag to her room, believing they won't harm a girl. It is both wonderful and terrible how the various neighbours react to her death! And even more wonderful how we understand Donal, who borrowed the clothing of a fighter without the courage, and who permitted a young woman to protect him.

James Russell is a powerful performer who doesn't necessarily need lines. Ed Malone, as a lanky, young motormouth IRA supporter, is a comic find. O'Reilly's blocking and the full cast were pause-perfect. They listen to each other and react as though each moment is a fresh experience. The inclusive set design of the tenement by Charlie Corcoran goes beyond the stage to the walls of the theatre itself.



Meg Hennessy as Minnie Powell and James Russell as Donal Davoren in *The Shadow of a Gunman*. Photo: Carol Rosegg.



Paul Dano as Austen and Ethan Hawke as Lee in *True West*. Photo: Joan Marcus.

Ethan Hawke, who was Sam Shepherd's (1943 – 2017) friend and an enthusiast, delivers a chilling performance as Lee in *True West* at the American Airlines Theatre. It is the story of estranged brothers trying to switch places. Lee is a violent drifter; Austen (Paul Dano), a button-down writer. Some critics have called it less a play than an acting exercise, but that ignores the title. The brutality of the frontier is a theme of Shepherd's work, as is the tension between the primitive and the cultured – in society and in each of us. Director James MacDonald was mightily challenged; his Broadway production was preceded by two exceptional revivals of the play, most notably off-Broadway with John Malkovich and Gary Sinise (1982), and at Circle in the Square with Philip Seymour Hoffman and John C. Reilly (2000).

We know Lee in part through reactions to him. Dano flattened the emotional arc by not responding to Lee with as much terror as some of us in the audience felt. At times his behaviour almost normalised Lee's excesses. Saul Kimmer, as the agent Lee tricked into a screen contract, barely tapped into the satire. The set by Mimi Lien placed the action at an odd angle, especially with that jutting kitchen cabinet. Austen's victory – the magnificent scene with the stolen toasters, when all the bread pops in sequence – was less a mechanical aria in this production than the sound of breakfast. Yet those last battles between the brothers touched on the mythic. We were there, totally engaged, and Austen's heartbreak in not being part of his father or brother's life is as palpable and tragic as our realisation that both of those men are lost souls, incapable of love.

Aaron Sorkin's adaptation of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, from the 1960 novel by Harper Lee about a small-town lynching of an innocent man, has received rave reviews, but it seems dated. Atticus Finch (Jeff Daniels) is front-and-center. A white lawyer, reared in the

segregated South, he risks his life for a black defendant. Gbenga Akinnagbe as the defendant (ironically, a minor role) did not seem real, but Erin Wilhelmi (*The Crucible*) as his white accuser, stole scene after scene. The play seemed too small for the large stage of the Shubert Theatre. Maybe the battle with the Harper Lee estate drained everyone's inspiration.

Choir Boy by Tarell Alvin McCraney (who wrote the story on which the film *Moonlight* is based) tells the engaging story of a gay, black, scholarship boy who loses his cool to a bully, and is punished by being denied the very activity that gives meaning to his school life – leading the choir. The music is at times exhilarating, and at times not. However, the performance by Jeremy Pope as Pharus, described by the author as an effeminate young man of colour, is blow-your-socks-away charismatic. Whenever he is centre stage, the play zings. His first challenge highlights the spoiled bully (J. Quinton Johnson) and the all-black prep school's understanding headmaster (good performance by Chuck Cooper). But *Choir Boy* ignites with Pharus' second problem – forbidden love...forbidden at least in the dorms and in the showers. The play closes with tremendous poignancy. Jeremy Pope's next gig is in *Ain't Too Proud* at the Imperial Theatre.

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BROADWAY LISTINGS

Ain't Too Proud, Imperial; *Aladdin*, New Amsterdam; *All My Sons*, American Airline; *Anastasia*, Broadhurst; *The Band's Visit*, Ethel Barrymore; *Beautiful: Carole King Musical*, Stephen Sondheim; *Be More Chill*, Lyceum; *The Book of Mormon*, Eugene O'Neill; *Burn This*, Hudson; *Camelot*, Vivian Beaumont; *The Cher Show*, Neil Simon; *Chicago the Musical*, Ambassador; *Choir Boy*, Samuel J. Friedman; *Come from Away*, Schoenfeld; *Dear Evan Hansen*, The Music Box; *The Ferryman*, Bernard B. Jacobs; *Frozen*, St. James; *Gary, Booth*; *Hades Town*, Walter Kerr; *Hamilton*, Richard Rodgers; *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, Lyric; *Ink*, Samuel J. Friedman; *King Kong*, Broadway; *King Lear*, Cort; *Kinky Boots*, Al Hirschfeld; *Kiss Me Kate*, Studio 54; *The Lion King*, Minskoff; *Mean Girls*, August Wilson; *My Fair Lady*, Vivian Beaumont; *Network*, Belasco; *Oklahoma*, Circle in the Square; *The Phantom of the Opera*, Majestic; *Pretty Woman the Musical*, Nederlander; *The Prom*, Longacre; *Nantucket Sleigh Ride*, Mitzi E. Newhouse at Lincoln Center; *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Shubert; *Tootsie*, Marquis; *True West*, American Airlines; *Waitress*, Brooks Atkinson; *What the Constitution Means to Me*, Helen Hayes; *Wicked*, Gershwin.