

‘Too Long The Heart’

The place: a lonely farmhouse in County Cork. The time: the present day. A hooded man with an English-sounding accent is bundled through the door. What follows is a sincere and considered analysis of Northern Ireland’s recent troubled history; terrorist outrage, government connivance, and Republican in-fighting are all examined, as emerging playwright David Hutchison unveils a thoughtful and even-handed script.

A little *too* even-handed, perhaps. At times, Hutchison’s dialogue felt self-conscious in its neutrality; like an oh-so-balanced news report, each and every opinion was immediately countered by an opposing one. The two strongest characters – one embodying the British establishment, and one speaking for dissident Republicans – prove evenly matched in their wordplay. Such careful equivalence deprived the play of a little of its sting; at times, Hutchison made me feel an alarming sympathy for the devil, but it was seductively easy to reassure myself that *everyone’s* a devil round here.

Everyone, that is, except the two younger characters. The naïve Marty, played with heart by an effortlessly engaging Des O’Gorman, is this play’s Everyman – watching with impotent horror as his honest convictions are twisted, subverted and destroyed. Clare Ross, meanwhile, plays the sassy and foul-mouthed Caitlin, manipulative and manipulated in equal measure. I cared about this young couple’s future – cared that they seemed to be throwing it away – so it’s a shame, I think, that they were relegated to bystanders for such a large part of the play.

The often-hapless young duo also provide some much-needed humour. A gawkily awkward sex scene deserved more laughs than it got from a faintly-startled audience, and some lightweight nonsense around a certain brand of biscuit concealed a much more deadly power-play. It's neatly witty, too, that their well-spoken abductee – a man who may or may not be a British army major – appears to know Ireland quite a bit better than the Irish do themselves.

These variations in pace, however, were sparser than they could have been. I'm left with a sense that *Too Long The Heart* had rather too long a script: that Hutchison was dragging his feet, in an over-solicitous attempt to ensure his audience followed every detail. At times, the dialogue degenerates into a thinly-veiled history lesson, with a worthy desire to explain all the subtleties overpowering both character and plot. And when two Irish characters feel the need to explain to each other what the Garda is... well, perhaps it's a warning that we're not fully immersed in their world.

As always with Siege Perilous' productions, I admired the adventurous little details: the softly-softly opening (so underplayed that half the audience were still chatting as the actors arrived on stage), or the harmlessly offbeat decision to place a minor part of the set behind the audience's heads. Let's hope some of that spirit of experimentation rubs off on playwright Hutchison. He knows his subject, has an authoritative tone to his words, and clearly has insights to share. His weakness, I feel, is the simplest of all to correct: he's just a bit too careful.