

Reviews for Dolly West's Kitchen
Directed by McKerrin Kelly

Dolly West's Kitchen

Perhaps influenced by his own 1990 adaptation of Chekhov's "Three Sisters," Frank McGuinness mimics much of Chekhov's situational drama while examining the lives of the West family in this World War II drama set in Bunrana, County Donegal, Ireland. Like "Three Sisters," it mixes humor with melancholy as it delves into the emotional lives of the characters.

College-educated Dolly West (Kirsten Kollender) has spent seven years in Italy, studying art, but with the advent of the war she has reluctantly returned to help manage the family home. Her elder sister, Esther (Kacey Camp), and her husband, Ned (Greg Bryan), also reside there, along with her mother, Rima (Casey Kramer), her younger brother, Justin (Bret Mack), and their servant girl, Anna (Natalie Hope MacMillan). Early on, revelations occur that not all is well among the siblings, and when British soldier Alec (Shawn Savage) arrives with two American GIs, Marco (Cameron J. Oro) and Jamie (Martin Doordan), their appearance provides the catalyst for changes in all their lives.

McGuinness' characters are universally the products of fractured families and unhappy marriages. Rima's unfaithful husband left her; Esther's loveless marriage makes her ripe for Jamie's attention; Dolly's former lover, Alec, has issues; and Justin's closeted homosexuality makes him fear Marco's attentions.

There's nothing like an Irish play for deliciously complex angst, and this one doesn't disappoint. Kramer is lusty and earthy, and her powerful characterization is scene-stealing. Doordan is comically and overtly gay, yet he and Mack provide some of the most tender moments in the play. Kollender and Camp's sisterly relationship within the dynamic of the story provides edgy gravity to the unfolding events.

Though McKerrin Kelly's direction is subtle and carries just the right amount of passion, it might be noted that in several scenes the actors' failure to project makes details inaudible. Nonetheless, the entire production is engaging and thought-provoking.

Though the ending is a contrivance neatly disposing of all the characters' concerns, it remedies the affairs of all with a hopeful outlook. Accomplished actors and a meaty script make for good theater.

Reviewed by Melinda Schupmann for backstage.com

Theater review: 'Dolly West's Kitchen' at Theatre Banshee

Contemporary flavor accents the traditional recipe of "Dolly West's Kitchen" at Theatre Banshee. Frank McGuinness' 1999 comic drama about an atypical Irish family during World War II has its ungainly ingredients, but they certainly reflect modern tastes.

Unmarried, college-educated Dolly (tartly understated Kirsten Kollender) has unwillingly returned from studying art in Italy to nominally neutral County Donegal and her fractious, well-to-do clan. Esther (invested Kacey Camp), Dolly's elder sister, barely tolerates devoted husband Ned Horgan (Greg Bryan). Justin (intense Brett Mack), their brother, is a fierce Anglophobic nationalist with a secret. And matriarch Rima (show-stealing Casey Kramer) understands her children and the changing world ahead better than her ribald derision indicates.

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Things begin to sizzle with Alec Redding (Shawn Savage), the Englishman whom Dolly knew while at Trinity. Stirring in two American soldiers -- flamboyant homosexual Marco Delaviculario (vivid Cameron J. Oro) and taciturn Jamie O'Brien (Martin Doordan), his hetero cousin -- McGuinness sets his themes simmering toward a grave Act 1 curtain, letting internecine and topical issues boil over in Act 2.

Director McKerrin Kelly serves the quasi-Chekhovian property with detailed efficiency around designer Dan Conroy's set, assisted by Bosco Flanagan (lighting), Jessica Dalager (costumes) and Mark McClain Wilson (sound). Her cast, including pert Natalie Hope MacMillan as perceptive maid Anna, is proficient, although some sacrifice audibility to naturalism.

That's one liability, the top-heavy, overstuffed structure another. Despite their pertinence, certain gay elements feel anachronistic in context, and one character's post-intermission absence dims the energy. Even so, there's plenty to savor in "Dolly West's Kitchen." Abbey devotees and Banshee habitués will be sated.

Reviewed by David C. Nichols for Culture Monster

Theatre Banshee Offers a Strong Production of the Uneven 'Dolly West's Kitchen'

Here's something I learned this week: during World War II, Ireland remained neutral. Of course, saying you're neutral and actually being neutral are two different things, and that psychological dichotomy underlies most of the tension in Frank McGuinness' *Dolly West's Kitchen*. The play benefits from its concentration on an area of the war that hasn't been much covered in theater, although it is flawed in a couple of major ways. The new production at Theatre Banshee, however, is about as good a presentation of this show as one might hope for, with a terrific cast highlighted by a superb Casey Kramer.

In the early days of WWII, the West family lives in the Irish town of Buncrana, removed from the shooting but not from the worry that Britain could fall and Germany might occupy the Emerald Isle. Dolly (Kirsten Kollender), who had to abandon her restaurant in Italy to avoid the rise of Mussolini, is the current head of the household because matriarch Rima (Casey Kramer) is more content to garden and drink. Sister Esther (Kacey Camp) is unhappy about her marriage, while younger brother Justin (Brett Mack) is letting his position in the Irish Army go to his head. Things change when Dolly's British ex-lover Alec (Shawn Redding) arrives with two American GIs in tow, as people partner up frantically before the war puts them all in a Cuisinart and hits spin.

Kollender is splendid as the worldly and willful Dolly, demonstrating surface strength and bruising wit but also vulnerability right beneath. Camp captures Esther's bitterness vividly, but doesn't completely convince with her character's eventual change of heart. Redding makes an appropriate partner for the impressive Dolly, matching her point for point, but unfortunately his second act situation as written comes off as clichéd. Mack is believable as the petulant Justin and manages to make his character's major change convincing through sheer emotion.

Natalie Hope MacMillan brings bright comic energy and skill to the housemaid Anna, and Greg Bryan makes Esther's long-suffering husband Ned effectively sympathetic. Cameron J. Oro's obvious talent isn't enough to make his proudly out homosexual Marco credible in this setting and time period, and Martin Doordan is entirely too glum as his cousin Jamie. Finally, Kramer is clearly having a ball as Rima, a self-

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professed “bad bitch who says what she likes.” She’s a delight to behold, getting the biggest laughs in the show but also delivering on all of her dramatic moments as well. It’s one of those perfect meetings of actor and role, and the results are wonderful.

Director McKerrin Kelly gets good work from her actors and stages the show smoothly, but isn’t able to overcome the two inherent flaws in the play. McGuinness’ technique of having his characters speak and act in more modern ways than they likely did back in 1940s Ireland mostly works, but his inclusion of the very much “out” Marco seems entirely anachronistic. A guy openly hitting on every straight man in his path would not have just been seen as adorably wacky in that era — homophobia was alive and well for not only the Irish but also the Brits and Yanks, and “don’t ask, don’t tell” was but a pretty dream back then. The play’s second flaw is that the concluding act is far weaker and more conventional than the first act, which is a letdown. Dan Conroy’s home set is spare but effective, and Jessica Dalager’s costume design, particularly Dolly’s array of stylish outfits, is clever and evocative of the era.

Review by Terry Morgan for LAIST.com

THE ACTING IS DELICIOUS, THE SCRIPT IS HALF BAKED

October has seen a great run for mothers on the Los Angeles stage: Lily Knight in *Peace In Our Time* at Anteaus, Denise Crosby in *House of Gold* at EST/LA and now Casey Kramer as an Irish matriarch in Theatre Banshee’s perfect mounting of the imperfect *Dolly West’s Kitchen*.

The second act weaknesses in Frank McGuinness’ 1999 study of a wartime Irish family are easy to forgive, given the excellent ensemble work, McKerrin Kelly’s economical direction, Jessica Dalager’s authentic costumes and Dan Conroy’s persuasive, homely set. It may be in Dolly’s kitchen that the complex issues of World War II are played out by multi-national characters, but Rima West, who is the mother of the titular character, is so important to this play that everyone still talks about her when she is offstage. McGuinness has written her as one of those wise, powerful, aging figures without whom the family might explode under its disparate intentions (think Big Daddy in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*). Casey Kramer handles this huge responsibility with a gigantic emotional presence and range that is true and endearing: she is funny, smart, quick, slow, angry, sad, happy, drunk, and so simultaneously strong and feeble that it would seem only a few actors could pull off the character at all.

To be fair, the audience isn’t always thinking of her, or longing for her return when she is not present, because the rest of the cast is unfeigned and sensitive, and their complicated, fascinating characters are busy fussing and fighting with varying degrees of self-interest in the context of war: Irish soldiers (Greg Bryan and Brett Mack) appear cowardly when their state’s official neutrality has them standing up to British bullying to get into the war; American soldiers (Cameron J. Oro and Martin Doordan), one who is patently gay, worry over the coming invasion of Normandy, and the Englishman (Shawn Savage sporting a Ronald Colman mustache) moons and spoons with the Irish and Americans — and all of them drink. Over and under all these brooding men are the women who love them, sisters Dolly and Esther (Kirsten Kollender and Kacey Camp), the not quite ingenuous maid Anna (Natalie Hope MacMillan), and, of course, Rima. The two hours spent with this lot feels much shorter and much more resonant than the exposition would have them be.

The action of the play is slight, mostly intellectual, and sadly flushed away in McGuinness’ second act, which resolves its three serious conflicts with two fistfights and a good talking to. Such facile writing won’t do, especially when the previous hour and a half has built up expectations with great literacy, poignancy,

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and depth. Mr. McGuinness has a basic responsibility as a playwright to honor the thematic integrity of his premise, and when he solves his characters' problems with cheap and aphorismic ease (to everyone's delight, a shell-shocked soldier snaps out of it (!) when he gets yelled at), he sells short the promise of his aspirations.

Still, the divine Casey Kramer and a marvelous ensemble, shepherded by Kelly's quiet, pointed direction, are reason enough to support Theatre Banshee and this thoroughly entertaining show.

by Frank Arthur for Stageandcinema.com

Come to Dolly's Kitchen

Ireland's uneasy neutrality during World War II, the country's deep-rooted conflict with Britain and the divide between Catholics and Protestants serve as both backdrop and catalyst for one Irish family's personal struggles in a solid staging of Frank McGuinness' seriocomic, Chekhovian domestic drama, "Dolly West's Kitchen," running through Dec. 4 at Theatre Banshee in Burbank.

Director McKerrin Kelly's observant approach, a fully committed cast and earthy humor prevent the play from sagging under the weight of its heavier dramatic notes. What at length boils to the surface is both expected and unexpected, albeit with a too-contemporary explication of issues of sexual identity.

Of the three adult West siblings, only independent Dolly (a quietly compelling Kirsten Kollender) left the comfortable family home in County Donegal near the Ulster border. Studying art at Trinity College, she became a successful restaurateur in Italy until the rise of Mussolini, and prudence, brought her back.

Set in the family's kitchen, the play begins four years after Dolly's return. The household consists of her increasingly dissatisfied sister Esther (Kacey Camp), their tormented younger brother Justin (an achingly sensitive Brett Mack), Esther's hapless husband Ned (Greg Bryan), bubbly teenage maid Anna (Natalie Hope MacMillan) and Rima, the ribald, outspoken matriarch of the West clan, a force of nature memorably played by stand-out Casey Kramer.

As Ireland clings to neutrality, precariously positioned with its strategically valuable ports between Allied Forces and Axis powers, the Wests are engaged in intense personal battles of their own.

Ned and Justin have joined the volunteer Irish Army and Justin's angry nationalism, fed by widespread fears of an eventual British invasion from the north, has risen to a fever pitch. Esther, restless and desiring something else and something more, resents Dolly's freedom and is openly contemptuous of her stolid but devoted husband. Anna, the product of an abusive Catholic orphanage upbringing, carries unexpected iron beneath her veneer of girlish innocence.

Into the simmering mix comes Dolly's bisexual former British lover, Alec (Shawn Savage), newly enlisted and stationed at nearby Derry. He hopes to reunite with Dolly, but is weighted with his own fears and uncertainties.

Then Rima stirs the pot. Discerning the needs of her struggling children with startling compassion and clarity — despite her salty tongue and whiskey-spiked humor — she brings home a pair of American soldiers from a local pub: openly gay Marco (Cameron J. Oro) and his taciturn straight cousin Jamie (Martin Doordan).

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Independent, tart-tongued Dolly cooks rationed food and whatever the hens and garden provide. The family and newcomers gather in her kitchen to drink, share meals and angst, squabble, hark back to the past, fear the future and begin to speak truths to each other and themselves.

The facileness of an epilogue providing a wrap-up for each character in the aftermath of the war is mitigated by tenderness and a prevailing sense of hope.

The professionalism of director and cast is echoed in Dan Conroy's country kitchen design, Jessica Dalager's deft costumes, expressive lighting design by Bosco Flanagan and Mark McClain Wilson's clean ambient sound.

Reviewed by Lynne Heffley for Glendalenewspress.com