

Reviews of "Hostage" Directed by McKerrin Kelly

The Hostage



In 1959 Dublin, a young British soldier is held captive by the Irish Republican Army while an equally young IRA volunteer awaits execution for killing a policeman. Should the British carry out the Irishman's sentence, the IRA will do the same to the Englishman. Playwright Brendan Behan, himself a former IRA member, took this dire premise to mold a sly political satire that reveals there is plenty of guilt and hypocrisy on both sides of the Anglo-Irish conflict, which tend to be drowned in swigs of Guinness or shots of Jameson. Pat (John McKenna) is an ex-IRA soldier who with his "wife" Meg (Jenn Pennington) runs the establishment whose denizens include assorted whores (male and female), a daft ex-IRA leader (Barry Lynch) and other sundry lumpenproletariat. When a steely IRA officer (Mark Colson) hides a British conscript (Patrick Joseph Rieger) in the house, tensions and hilarity ensue as assorted characters begin to question the rationale for the soldier's fate, especially a young girl (Amanda Deibert) who falls for the soldier. Director McKerrin Kelly and company have culled text from the original Irish version and the subsequent English one to craft a boisterous production filled with songs and jigs, characters chatting with the audience and a provocative finale.

Reviewed by Martín Hernández for the *LA Weekly*

It's easy to see why Brendan Behan's "The Hostage" is so seldom produced. A wild Jackson Pollock of a play, it splashes over the proscenium. Those interpreters who don't properly frame its anarchic spirit are likely to produce a dismal mess.

In her staging at Theatre Banshee, McKerrin Kelly strikes just the right note of controlled disorderliness – a tone so spontaneous, we feel that we are truly part of the play – and considering how often the characters breach the fourth wall, that's wholly appropriate. Yet there's a martial rigor to the proceedings that belies the general sprawl.

The action is set in the late 1950s in a seedy Dublin lodging house populated by reprobates and whores of both sexes, who break into song or dance at the drop of a well-worn shillelagh. Pub manager Pat (infectiously cheery John McKenna) saw action during the Troubles with his captain, Monsewer (ever-excellent Barry Lynch), the establishment's senile owner, who imagines he's still in the thick of the action. On this particular evening, he is. The IRA has chosen the premises to stash a young British soldier (Patrick Joseph Rieger). If the Brits execute an IRA soldier tomorrow as planned, the British hostage will be shot in reprisal.

Music director Dan Conroy, who appears in the show, keeps a firm rein on the frequent musical interludes, which vary from heightened music hall turns to realistic pub performances. Among the tightly knit cast, Rieger stands out as a cheeky but terrified youth turned bargaining chip in an age-old struggle, and the suitably named Kacey Camp is hilarious as a religious zealot with erotomaniacal appetites.

Reviewed by F. Kathleen Foley for the *Los Angeles Times*

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With an engaging, almost circus-like atmosphere, this unusual piece, written by Brendan Behan in the late 1950s, offers something for everyone. Laughter, tears, joy, and fear intertwine through a collection of wonderfully performed Gaelic tunes. Director McKerrin Kelly exposes the production's heart and soul. Even during the most chaotic moments, of which there are many, her guidance is evident.

But she couldn't have pulled off these remarkable results were it not for the nearly flawless cast, whose characters inhabit this Dublin brothel. This is an ensemble in every sense of the word. John McKenna and Jenn Pennington as the loving, yet sometimes bickering, proprietors maintain the show's momentum. McKenna, in particular, charmingly addresses the audience on numerous occasions. In less-skilled hands, this theatrical convention might come off as false or stilted.

The establishment's occupants include ragtag, gender-crossing prostitutes played with irreverent glee by Dan Conroy, Andra Carlson, and Casey Kramer. Their equally goofy customers include Vash Boddie and Marco Tazioli. John Schumacher gives a delightful turn as a nebbish boarder whose search for love leads him to the arms of a local social worker, played with scene-stealing abandon by Kacey Camp. Barry Lynch plays a kilt-wearing, bagpipe-honking revolutionary, barking orders at one and all.

Occupying the "normal" side of the story are Mark Colson and Levi Petree as two members of the Irish Republican Army, assigned to guard the play's title character. And here's where the play takes a decidedly serious turn. Patrick Joseph Rieger plays a British private abducted and held prisoner in the midst of this madness. Rieger and Amanda Deibert, playing a young Irish housekeeper, provide the dramatic juxtaposition to the otherwise farcical goings-on. Their beautifully understated scene work affords the audience time to regroup while the play builds to its bittersweet conclusion. Ultimately, the lessons learned from this moving production concerning the ravages of bigotry lend credence to the Irish saying "A man's fame lasts longer than his life."

Reviewed by Dink O'Neill for *Back Stage West*

The Hostage is a Rousing Good Time at Theatre Banshee

Although it may seem like a good time to party at the Dublin pub/brothel on stage at Theatre Banshee, there's a deal more trouble than treble in the shenanigans when a rather nasty, by-the-book, IRA Officer (Mark Colson) and his slightly dim-witted Volunteer (Levi Petree), lunge into the middle of the everlasting party we've come to know and expect in most of the Irish-themed plays we've ever seen.

In Brendan Behan's 1958 riot act - "The Hostage" - singing and fighting, drinking and dancing are equally interchangeable as barkeep Pat (a sturdily superb John McKenna), who's seen it all, and done most of it, tries to bring some sense to bear on a very sticky situation in which a young British soldier (a believable Patrick Joseph Rieger), is being held hostage in a decaying brothel in Dublin by the IRA, as a bargaining chip for the release of an IRA prisoner who is to be executed by the British in Belfast the next day.

Reviews of “Hostage” Directed by McKerrin Kelly

The Nationalists in the room – just about everyone else, nominally and sympathetically – are presented with a field day, and night, of argumentation, justification, ramification and lots of hooch. Pat and his wife, Meg (a feisty Jenn Pennington), are used to fighting, for, against and with each other and anyone else within hearing. It's their strongest bond. Their boarders: a couple of randy drag queens - Vash Boddie as a mincing Princess Grace and Dan Conroy as a corseted Rio Rita; the lovely Andra Carlson as Collette, a girl of the evening, the afternoon and the morning; the redoubtable Casey Kramer, hilarious as a poorly preserved 'older sister' who doesn't take cash any more – she offers to pay her partners; John Schumacher as Mulleady, who plays bodhran and dances along with the best, and the drunkest; and Marco Tazioli, a Russian sailor who's still got lots of Bolshevik Bounce.

Then there's Miss Gilchrist, a religious do-gooder – she describes herself as a 'sociable worker' – who's despised wherever she goes, until Pat gets her looped, when she becomes a lot more fun. Kacey Camp has her character down to a 'hail Mary', but mostly when she's kneeling. Amanda Deibert is the sweet, innocent maid-of-all-work, Theresa, who keeps the beds changed and the whisky flowing, until she falls for the beleaguered young hostage. Barry Lynch gives a flavorful performance as Monsewer, the slightly daft owner of the brothel, who's ready at the drop of a bellows to play a lament on his bagpipes.

Far from being a realistic play that follows the rules, “The Hostage” is a riotous hullabaloo of spontaneous song and dance; improvisation and serious humor; respect and disrespect; an ongoing discussion of tyranny, freedom and nationalism; sentimentality and silliness; throwaway lines and character shtick; and absurdism and real tragedy hand in hand. And though a great deal of fun is had by all, outrageousness is the key mood.

Based on the Joan Littlewood original production of Brendan Behan's play in East London, Theatre Banshee drew from the original Irish text, the British text, and some innovations of their own. Director McKerrin Kelly has done a superb job of keeping a dream cast on task and succeeds at dissolving the audience in stitches. Arthur MacBride's scenic design, lighting by Michael Mahlum, costumes by Laura Brody, fight choreography by Brian Danner, and non-fight choreography by Patrick Reiger all contribute to a terrific evening at the theatre, even if you're not Irish.

Reviewed by Madeline Shaner for the *Park LaBrea News/Beverly Press*

The Hostage

If any theatrical presentation was ever suited for the Theatre Banshee, it would have to be this one by Brendan Behan. Over the years that this website has covered the Banshees the one common element in every production has been the commitment to the story. Surrounding this commitment is the excellence of the actors, the visionary directing, the scrupulous attention to detail and above all the promise to the audience that the performance will be at the highest artistic level. This show fills all of the above and then some. The bristling tension is buffered by music and nervous mirth as the cast almost brings the audience on stage with the pre-show music and the interaction with the audience. Playwright Brendan Behan was said to have described himself as a “drinker with a writing problem.” He was also a volunteer in the Irish Republican Army and a committed Irish Republican so it is not unusual that his writings were politically charged and influenced by his incarceration for killing two Dublin policemen and earlier jailing for attempting to blow up the Liverpool docks.

The Hostage depicts a rowdy and unorthodox group of people living in a house that is part rooming

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house and part brothel. Prostitutes, transvestites, revolutionaries and other unsavory characters inhabit the place where suddenly two IRA officers bring a young cockney soldier that was caught at the border with Northern Ireland and hold him hostage in the house, charging the owner, a former IRA commandant, to keep watch over the lad. The buzz around the house is that an 18 year old IRA member is being held in a Belfast jail by the British forces and is scheduled for hanging. If that happens, the officers holding the British soldier swear that he will die at the same time, and hope to use him as a bargaining chip.

As serious as the theme is, the play develops around many musical numbers sung by the house "guests". Some songs are upbeat, some are patriotic and others are nostalgic but the levity does not quite lift the foreboding thought that this young soldier may not live through the night.

In the brief hours, love blooms between the soldier and a young girl who had lived in a convent and now resides in the house as a helper. They consummate their love and promise to love each other forever – however long that may be. Patrick Joseph Rieger and Amanda Diebert are the star crossed lovers.

There are many wonderful characterizations that add to the bizarreness of the events. Miss Gilchrist, for example, a righteous and religious member of the St. Vincent de Paul Society who constantly chastises the women who "work" in the house, but when she visits Mr. Mulleady pretty soon the entire house hears her moans revealing a completely different side of her personality. John Schumacher and Kacey Camp are excellent as they create the unlikely passionate duo.

For outright laughs there's Rio Rita and his boyfriend Princess Grace, an outrageous couple that brings a new meaning to the term "Queen". Dan Conroy and Vash Boddie are exceptional in their transvestite – gay roles.

Then there's Barry Lynch who usually takes center stage no matter what role he plays. Here he depicts Monsewer, a former army officer whose mind has long ago drifted back into the days of glory and is humored by everyone in the house, mostly to keep down his rants and raves. Lynch wears a kilt and plays bagpipes as he barks military orders to the group. The barking of the orders is realistic and authentic. The bagpipes – well – they're loud.

John McKenna plays the part of Pat, the owner and generally good natured host of the house which he runs with Meg played by Jenn Pennington. She's a lot more high-strung and demanding but together they make a good pair. It can't be easy keeping fourteen actors in the right place at the right time, being that most of them are on stage all the time, but Director McKerrin Kelly meets the challenge with imagination and ingenuity, using well placed props and even the actual exit door as part of the set. The pace is fast and the dialog is crisp and you even understand the Irish dialect. All the singing and bantering by the characters does not hide the air of anxiety and angst that blankets the house – in fact the entire city, as the news on the radio update the situation about the IRA youth in Belfast.

Behar never lets us forget the conflict; never loses focus on the hatred between the two groups and as passionate as some of the characters are for their cause, we distinctly get the feeling they feel the futility of it all. In the end, it is a twist of cynical fate that brings closure to the hostage situation, indicating that the cost of war touches far more lives than just the casualties and that the authoritarian best laid plans usually result in the worst course of action for the innocent citizens.

Other cast members include Andra Carlson, Marco Tazioli, Casey Kramer, Levi Petree, and Mark Colson.

Reviews of "Hostage"
Directed by McKerrin Kelly

Raucous Bawdy Camaraderie at Banshee

A Seisiun of sorts is filling Theatre Banshee's little theatre with accordion bleats and bodhran beats. Traditional Irish music is the backbone of the company's current production of Brendan Behan's "The Hostage," a play about Irish/British rivalry and the raucous camaraderie of the common man.

A brothel in Dublin doubles as home and hearth for Irish nationalist Pat (John McKenna) and his wife Meg (Jenn Pennington). The house is owned by the aging Monsewer (the rowdily comic Barry Lynch), an Anglo-Irish comrade of Pat's from the Irish Civil War whose mushy mind is kept somewhat intact by his incessant bagpipe playing. Pat and Meg run the joint, doling out whisky and women in an environment of verbose good cheer laced with hints of Irish melancholy and raw sarcasm.

Soon, the misfit family of whores, transvestites (a heavily eyeshadowed Dan Conroy) and old Irish coots is disrupted by a British prisoner. The IRA drags The Soldier (a show-stealing Patrick Joseph Rieger) into the Dublin house of ill repute and proceed to guard the place with military meanness. The IRA troops are calling for the release of one of their own men in return for the release of The Soldier. As time ticks away, we're constantly reminded that the boy in the Belfast prison is scheduled to be shot soon, a pronouncement that begins to whiten the knuckles of The Soldier.

Rieger brings wit and pathos to the play's pivotal character, playing up The Soldier's 19-year-old bravado, while slowly revealing his mounting fear. The actor is charmer, heartbreaker and tragic hero all in one.

The ensemble cast is solid all around, showing up with Irish pluck and comic bitterness throughout. Spontaneous singing sessions add levity to Behan's text while sometimes filling us in on Irish history. McKerrin Kelly directs with a mostly solid hand, but sometimes focus gets split a wee bit too much and we're not sure which bunch of on-stage rowdies to follow. Show up early to see some seriously fun hooting, hollering and harmonizing.

Reviewed by Amy Lyons for MyDailyFind.com