

DOSSIER

Absolution



Owen O'Neill performs his play, "Absolution," 58E3D Theaters. Photos by Art Minc. 9/8/2010.

Jesus was a man of words. "He said he would save the world," laments the man of *Absolution*. He promised. Believers say he sacrificed his life for the sins of his people—but was he a man of action? Where was Jesus when Father McClellan raped 7-year-old Nathan O'Lone? Nathan didn't see him. "Suffer the little children," wrote Mark, "and forbid them not, to come unto me: for such is the Kingdom of Heaven (10:14)." Suffer the little children, indeed. Bear the burden and then wait, wait until the day comes when He returns and you may, or may not, pass through the gates of this supposed Heaven.

Not that we are any better than Jesus. We are all wordsmiths, in a way. "My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart," recites the repentant Catholic behind the confessional screen. But, are we sorry? Is a child-molesting priest absolved of his mortal sins just because he confessed to a colleague? Perhaps that is one of the questions which Owen O'Neill is asking in his gloriously wrenching one-man play. For when temptation next rattles its tail, Father A or Father B will heed its call. He who sins will, expectedly, sin again.

So, the man on stage decides to do what Jesus didn't do: he takes action. He lures McClellan into an apple orchard, slits his trousers and castrates him before burying him 9 feet below the earth (6 feet, he feels, is just begging for the police's attention). As he gripped the spade, the man reminisces: "it gave me such an inexplicable comfort," a sense of gratification, but no remorse. The man may not have saved Nathan, but he believes that he has prevented the suffering of potential victims. For the first time, the world begins to feel right. The man experiences a high, and what was supposed to be an isolated incident evolves into an obsession. There's Fathers Cronin, Gorman, Kearns, O'Dowd—dominos down, one after another, each death bloodier than the previous.

Although it is an examination of conscience, the man's monologue should not be considered a confession as forgiveness is not his aim. This is not to say that he isn't debilitated by guilt. A tremor runs through his body as he paces across the floor. Ignoring the mirror above the sink, he scrubs his hands furiously a la Lady MacBeth (Out damn'd spot! Out!). What if he could have helped these men? When Kearns places a revolver into the man's hand, pleading—"Please, shoot me!"—the man is awakened, his eyes finally freed from tunnel vision. He realizes Kearns's despair. Surely, the young priest can make amends? That is what the catechism teaches. But Kearns assures that he cannot curb his urges, not on his own. He believes that God has sent the man—like some sort angel of atonement—to stop him, death being the only end to his sins. Although the man does not wish to be revered, and certainly not crucified, he himself has made a grave sacrifice. He has traded his happiness, his sanity—a normal life with the woman he once loved, and still does—to be a lonely, broken, avenger.

Absolution, a part of the 1st Irish arts festival, is a tiny production. There's nothing flashy about it, no marquee. Most likely, it will not be nominated for a Tony. It will leave New York as quietly as it came, and this is most unfortunate. As brilliant as it is dark, it may be one of the most candid dramatic portrayals of humanity in quite some time. I can't imagine why O'Neill, renowned for his stand-up routines—winner of the Perrier Award (the

UK's most prestigious comedy prize)—decided to sit down and write such a horror. Perhaps it was the media explosion, Catholic pedophilia scarring newspapers around the globe. Or, maybe he was compelled by one particular incident, a tragedy in his own Northern county of Tyrone. Whatever the reason, I'm glad he told this story. We can only hope that the man's words will resound in the memories of his audience members for years to come. As for the twist that O'Neill so stealthily executes at the end: well, my mind is still stirring.

As part of the 1st Irish Festival 2010, Absolution will be at 59E59 Theaters until October 3rd.