



## **Absolution**

**Written and Performed by Owen O'Neill**

**Directed by Rachel O'Riordan**

**59E59 Theaters**

**59 East 59th Street**

[www.59e59.org](http://www.59e59.org)

*Review by Elise McMullen*

With all of the regurgitated fare on the big screen and on Broadway these days, storytellers should take an example of originality and pertinence from *Absolution*, the acclaimed 2008 Edinburgh Fringe hit making its U.S. premiere this fall during the 1st Irish Theatre Festival. Written and performed by Owen O'Neill, and directed by Rachel O'Riordan, *Absolution* walks a tightrope between what is revenge and what is justice without mincing words.

"I could have killed him quickly and got it over with," the man says with an unremorseful Irish lilt in his voice. "But I didn't, because I knew that whilst he lay there with his penis and testicles resting on his chest, I knew that then, and only then, would he truly repent to his God, would he truly feel sorry for what he had done. I was doing him a favor. I was giving him time to make a true confession."

Under simple lighting and within a spare set, O'Neill breathes light into these words. He is believable — a real killer without regrets or hesitation. He is not a sociopath like Showtime's *Dexter*, incapable of empathy, but an avenger for the abused; and the audience follows him willingly, even rallies for him, as he takes them through the killing of each of his victims. Who are his victims? They are the hidden, tucked away, physical and sexual abusers within the Catholic Church; and it is here, within the detailed accounts of that abuse, that the play becomes real. One cannot help but ask, "Is this revenge or is it true justice?"

Theatergoers tend to enjoy watching justice achieved on the stage or on the big screen. Build a villain big enough, and anyone will enjoy watching him fall. Storytellers have relied on this dramatic device for centuries, but O'Neill is simple and surprising in his writing. He doesn't exaggerate; he doesn't use dramatic shtick. It all just seems so matter-of-fact, simple, like the knowledge that if you cut someone, they will bleed. It's personal for the character, and although thrilling and sometimes shocking, O'Neill's writing and performance refrains from sheer sensationalism.

Although possibly hidden within the writing or maybe the result of the nature of a one-man show, the direction by Rachel O'Riordan (director of the acclaimed Broadway production of *Hurricane*) does not shine to its full potential. However, it must be said that O'Riordan's choices in lighting, staging, music and effects are on point and don't distract from the story.

In its third year, the 1st Irish Theatre Festival aims to bring the best of Irish theater to New York City, and it has done so by bringing in O'Neill. Ironically, O'Neill is known more as a stand-up comedian than a gritty dramatist, but anyone in the Irish "know" will sing his much deserved writing praises. Moreover, the festival's choice to premiere this particular play is culturally significant, since Ireland is second in the world (only to the U.S.) in its reporting of physical and sexual crimes upon children within the Catholic Church — a subject resonating deep within Irish communities.

Origin Theatre Company, the festival founder, continues to bring original, quality theatrical works out of Europe onto the American stage. Maybe Broadway producers will take it as a brotherly, competitive goading to produce more American shows as honest, simple and riveting as O'Neill's *Absolution*. For now, fleetingly, off-Broadway holds the highest cards.