

Sidhe

StageSceneLA.com 
accentuating the positive in los angeles theater.



A hunky young Irishman and his pretty but droopy young wife arrive at a dark, dingy Chicago apartment for a “look-see.” Since they’ve come baggage in hand, clearly, they’re planning on staying. No matter that the “semi-furnished” flat has only a sofa and a floor lamp. No matter that Conall and Jackie have no references. “Give me some cash, I’ll give you the keys, and then I’ll be out of your way,” offers Louise, the dour 30something landlady, and when the Irishman insists that “I’m not putting this many dollars in your hand without some metal in mine,” the exchange of cash and keys brings Louise and her new renter flirtatiously close. Even without witnessing this, Jackie is not at all happy about Conall’s decision to rent Louise’s upstairs apartment. “She looked at us,” she cautions the Irishman, and again, “She looked at us!”

Thus begins *Sidhe*, Ann Noble’s gripping psychological-political-supernatural suspense drama, getting its world premiere at North Hollywood’s The Road Theatre. Pronounced “Shee,” the sidhe are, according to Jackie, “forces, creators, destroyers” told about in Irish lore, and as *Sidhe* progresses, the question arises, have Conall and Jackie arrived unaccompanied, have they brought unearthly visitors with them, or could one of them possibly be one of the sidhe? After all, a strange electrical phenomenon has begun to occur from the moment Conall and Jackie arrive—lights flicker and power lines buzz. This phenomenon occurs when he touches her face, when she starts drawing in her sketch book, and when Louise asks to look at Jackie’s sketches. And if hints of the presence of supernatural beings amongst them were not enough to instill a sense of menace, there’s also the semi-automatic Conall carries in his trousers, not the only one he’s in possession of. Could the two be Northern Irish terrorists as well?

Downstairs from Conall and Jackie’s new abode, in the bar Louise owns and runs, her lone customer is on the way to drunken oblivion. The man is Chicago cop Vernon, Louise’s childhood friend and the widowed husband of her slain younger sister Amy. Though Louise and Vernon’s banter begins harmlessly enough with the pair debating the difference between “fate” and “destiny,” Vernon is soon onto his fourth scotch and thumping his head on the bar in an attempt to rid himself of memories of a holdup gone bad, one which claimed Amy’s life and left Vernon with a pair of unanswered and unanswerable questions. Just why couldn’t Amy stop cheating on a husband who loved her so completely? Just who is responsible for her death?

Other questions raised in *Sidhe* include the following: Why does Jackie berate Conall for telling Louise and Vernon that his name is O’Reilly, declaring that “it’s too close”? How is it that both Conall and Jackie know about Louise’s sister, including her name and the circumstances behind

her death? What is it that makes the lights flicker, sending Jackie to her sketchbook and causing Conall to ask, "What are they doing here? How did they get so close?" Who are Conall and Jackie really? Who are the "them" whose presence they feel? Who or what are the disturbing creatures Jackie is drawing? Why does Jackie tell Vernon that the only thing she believes in, has faith in, is violence, and that "In my world, you betray someone, you're killed"? Why does she then go on to say, "I was killed. By violence." Is she speaking literally?

The more Sidhe's mysteries deepen, the more the audience is drawn into the world playwright Noble has created. Though the complexities of this mixture of real human drama and supernatural peril make Sidhe sometime difficult to follow, especially in the second act, the play is never anything less than spellbinding, directed masterfully by Darin Anthony and performed by a masterful cast in a world created by a masterful design team.

Road Theatre fans already know Noble's gifts as a playwright—and her versatility. 2008's warm Irish family drama *And Neither Have I Wings To Fly* is about as far removed from the dark suspense of Sidhe as one can imagine, though the former did feature a bit of the supernatural—a ghost that only Noble's character could see. Both plays are the work of a gifted writer.

Sidhe's four actors couldn't be better. Noble (Louise) paints a vivid portrait of a woman who has learned to hide her pain beneath a cold veneer, but whose human needs are awakened by Conall's arrival. Rob Nagle (Vernon) once again proves himself versatility personified, his nasal Chicago accent, working class demeanor, and sad eyes revealing a Midwesterner tormented by guilt and loss. Patrick Joseph Rieger (Conall) and Jeanne Syquia (Jeanne) so disappear into their Irish personae, impeccable brogues and all, that it comes as a bit of a shock to hear their all-American accents post curtain calls. Rieger has movie star charisma and a trained actor's dramatic chops, his Conall blending menace and sex appeal in equal measure. Syquia's haunted eyes reveal horrendous sights seen, and her voice combines a warrior's strength and determination and a child's vulnerability.

Scenic designer Stephen Gifford once again outdoes himself with one of the most deliberately grubby sets in memory, run-down bar on the left and even seedier apartment on the right, decorated by prop designer Lila Waters. Lighting designer Christie Wright and designer David B. Marling join forces to make the invisible sidhe seem very real and present. (I love the crackle that accompanies every flickering light.) Music by Robert Schmidt enhances the sense of impending danger. Costumes by Sherry Linnell are just right for every character. Linda de Vries coached the actors on their spot-on accents. Conall understudy TJ Marchbank choreographed the very authentic-looking fight sequences. Jackie's frightening drawings are the work of artist Nathan Mejia. Make-up effects (bruises and black eyes) are courtesy of Lacy Hill.

Productions at the Road Theatre are never anything but first-rate in performance, direction, and design, even when (as in the case of last year's *The Unseen*) the play in question isn't this reviewer's cup of tea. Yes, Sidhe is a far cry from my usual bright and breezy fare, but I found it theater at its most original and riveting. Kudos again to Ann Noble for taking us on an enthralling journey.

The Road Theatre, 5108 Lankershim Bl., North Hollywood. Through March 20. Fridays and Saturdays at 8:00. Sundays at 2:00. Reservations: 818 761 8838 www.roadtheatre.org

--Steven Stanley
February 7, 2010

Photos: Matt Kaiser