

the daily break

REVIEW 'THE WEIR'

Weird and wonderful

Generic's atmospheric play set in an Irish barroom

By Page Laws
Correspondent

It's the misfortune of the Irish to have suffered famine, poverty and uncivil wars with those pushy Brits next door.

But oh, do they have the renowned luck o' the Irish when it comes to spawning great playwrights! Think Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw and Samuel Beckett. Then add contemporary greats such as Brian Friel, Marina Carr and our man of the hour, Conor McPherson, whose 1997 classic "The Weir" is ending this weekend at the Generic Theater.

Dillon Bates, just off a directing triumph with "Dead Man's Cell Phone" (Peninsula Community Theatre) repeats the feat, crafting another acting tour-de-force using two of that former production's actors: Destiny Deater (here as Valerie) and Lawrence Nichols (as Brendan).

"The Weir" is truly "weird." "Weir" means a type of dam that lets some water squeeze over or through; "weird" means, of course, bizarre or uncanny. Both words relate, however, to this atmospheric play set in a rural Irish barroom in "North-west Leitrim or Sligo" near an electricity-producing weir.

What's so special or weird about four Irishmen and one Irishwoman boozing hard, dissing the "German" tourists soon to inundate the town, and telling, as the Irish are wont to do, some tales?

It's all in the tales' carefully sequenced structure and their telling, in that pastoral location, so near to a weir (imagine an unseen and smaller Hoover Dam offstage). Critic Nicholas Grene explains the dam part: "It acts as a metaphor



Generic Theater's production of "The Weir" runs through Sunday in Norfolk. James McDaniel V, left, as Finbar Mack; Destiny Deater as Valerie; Lawrence Nichols as Brendan; and Tom O'Reilly as Jack. **BARBARA HAYS**

for the controlled release of emotion through talk and storytelling."

Life itself, in this setting, has supplied the "weird" part. Except for Brendan, each has the challenge of performing aria-like solo tales with lots of connective comic banter, both testy and tender. During each tale, the other actors must actively listen — showing their pleasure, fear or even horror through body expressions alone. Tom O'Reilly as Jack had one moment of seemingly broken concentration at the performance I saw; otherwise, the actors were amazingly on task for their 1½-plus hours onstage (no intermission for the audience, but brief exits for certain characters to "use the necessary").

At the play's start, Jack is the first to enter the empty barroom to draw himself a Guinness, only to find the tap malfunctioning. He grudgingly settles for an inferior bottled stout. We

later learn he has settled for a lonely life running a garage without the woman he loved but stupidly lost. Still alone, Jack pays for his drink on the honor system. He's soon joined by Brendan, the bartender and bar owner who is two decades his junior. Brendan is an essential stitching-together figure. He's being tempted to drink along with his customers, which he mostly resists. He is also being tempted to sell his farm's scenic upper field on behalf of himself and his two acquisitive (offstage) sisters. This field becomes a symbol of rural splendor being threatened by tourism (those so-called "Germans") and economic development.

Jack and Brendan are soon joined by Jim (played by John K. Cauthen Jr., another talented actor). Jim's supposedly a little slow-witted, but he delivers some of the play's pithier lines. He appears to make a living doing garage

and handyman work, and he cares for his declining mother. The trio discuss the expected impending arrival of Finbar Mack (James McDaniel V, another local semi-pro actor).

Finbar is the show's catalytic antagonist — the local who's left his country origins and enriched himself from afar by buying and selling local real estate. Though married, Finbar is escorting the only woman and non-native, Valerie. She's a member of Brendan's generation and has mysteriously moved to town to rent a Finbar-managed house, said, at first, with a laugh, to be built on a fairies' road. Valerie is clearly attractive to the men, though she speaks with a more educated Dublin accent, compared to their rural lilt and diction. The men often add an extraneous "s" to "you," to indicate its plural, such as Finbar's line: "How d'yous do today, boys?"). Crazy,

undesirable people are designated as "loolahs" and "headbangers."

A white-wine drinker among swillers of stout and liquor, Deater absolutely shines in her pivotal role. She will also prove to be the consummate teller of a spooky tale. But telling just what she tells would be telling way too much.

Though no longer in fashion in psychology, Sigmund Freud's ideas still count among critics, especially his notion of the uncanny. Freud uses the word for the things that give human beings a psychic "chill," the sense of being overwhelmed with strangeness, isolation and the unknown. The uncanny is the fear of a child being separated from a parent, that sense of being hopelessly lost, exiled from home forever. Though children never appear onstage, the macabre tales told by the men (and eventually Valerie) contain mentions of lost or frightened chil-

dren (or are they fairies?) knocking on doors, knocking inside walls.

Things in life that we can't understand — and they almost always involve death and dying — cannot always be dismissed.

See if you can spot the narrative seaming (and "seeming") in this profane, profound piece of Irish theater, so beautifully crafted and performed for us thousands of miles from Éire.

Page Laws is dean emerita of the Nusbaum Honors College at Norfolk State University. prlaws@aya.yale.edu

IF YOU GO

When: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 2:30 p.m. Sunday
Where: Down under Chrysler Hall, 215 St. Paul's Blvd., Norfolk
Tickets: \$18, advance; \$20, day of show. Discounts available.
Details: 757-441-2160, generictheater.org