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Bit-part actor steps in after star is injured

BUDDING actors performing at Cornwall's famous Minack Theatre were upstaged by a real-life drama when the leading man was rushed to hospital less than an hour before curtain-up.

As the Wednesday night audience were already settling into their seats for a production of *Playboy of the Western World* at the spectacular outdoor site, Mark Fitzgerald knocked himself unconscious when he fell over in the bathroom of his rented cottage.

Injured

Tour manager of the Ealing based Questors Theatre group, Jo Booth, said the first news she received as she was dealing with front-of-house, was that one of the actors had been injured.

"It was only after a while I realised it was the leading man we were talking about," she said. "I rushed down to the cottage and found Mark with the ambulance crew and his girlfriend Marianne March, who plays the leading lady Pegeen in the play."

While the protesting semi-conscious Mark was taken to casualty to be treated for a "huge bump", the tour manager rushed Marianne to the theatre to assume her role.

"Pat Gowman, the director, decided Kevin Boland, who was only in the third act of the play, should take over Mark's role," said Jo. "But he wasn't at the theatre and we had to send out a search party for him."

Yesterday Kevin, 25, who

by DEBBIE POGUE

has just finished training at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, said he immediately agreed to take on the task.

"It only hit me as I was driving to the theatre, what I had agreed to do.

"But it was a great experience, and although I was completely at sea, I held on by the skin of my teeth. I suppose you have to learn to swim when you are thrown in at the deep end."

The audience were made aware of the problem before the Irish comedy began, and Kevin says they were very tolerant with him throughout the production.

"I had to go on with the script in my hands, and still walk about and do all the actions."

Congratulate

"What was supposed to be four lines in third act, turned into me performing during the whole play. Luckily I had been there for six weeks of rehearsals, so I knew the play."

Meanwhile Mark, who was due to return to play Christy Mahon last night, managed to make it for the second half.

"He was adamant he should get out of the hospital and get back to the theatre to watch Kevin. And he was the first to rush down to congratulate him at the end after the audience gave a standing ovation," said Jo.

It's so real you can smell the poteen

The Playboy Of The Western World Minack Theatre

WHEN it was first staged in Dublin in 1907, this play by the Irish dramatist J M Synge – since regarded as a masterpiece – raised a riot. It raises nothing more harmful than riotous laughter here.

The Questors Theatre Company from London sets out not only to "romance through a romping lifetime" but also to romance the very stones of the theatre – and it succeeds.

Filled with "marvellous mighty talk", the play is a catalogue of contrasts, of rich language and poor peasants, hope and despair, laughter and tears, of what is real and what people think is real, in which neither the naked nor the clothed truth will out.

The action takes place in a shebeen in remote County Mayo, and all credit to designer Tessa Curtis and the stage management crew for a superbly detailed set in which one can smell the bog water as well as the poteen.

Like an accomplished acrobat, director Pat Gowman walks the wire between the play's comedy and apparent parricide without as much as the suggestion of a slip, and uses the different levels afforded by the Minack stage to open up what is essentially an interior play. The result is a hugely entertaining and earthy production.

The cast revel in the playwright's extravagant poetic language, and while their accents, like the wind which blows through the wild west of Ireland, may be variable, their high standard of performance is constant throughout.

Mark Fitzgerald more than makes his mark as the "young gaffer who'd capsize the stars", Christy Mahon; Michael Gabe is excellent as his mortified and almost scalped father; Joan Maynard is a truly formidable and tormenting Widow Quin, and Kelvin West is simply splendid as the cowardly scarecrow Shawn Keogh of Killakeen.

Inspired

However, Marianne March as the spirited Pegeen Mike transcends them all.

In an inspired performance, the best seen on this stage so far this season, she is so compelling that when she expresses her terrible grief for the playboy and the promise of happiness she has lost, she brings tears – to coin a line – to the eyes of the many Murphies in her father's shebeen as well as in those of the audience.

There are performances each evening at 8pm until Friday, with matinees at 2pm today (Wed) and on Friday.

– Frank Ruhrmund

At the Minack

PROVIDENCE and mercy spare us all, if the Questors Theatre Company from London is not only "romancing through a romping lifetime", but also after romancing the very stones at the Minack this week with "Playboy of the Western World". When it was first staged in Dublin in 1907, J. M. Synge's masterpiece raised a riot, here it raises nothing more harmful than riotous laughter.

This tale of "ordinary" Irish folk is told with "marvellous mighty talk": a catalogue of contrasts, of rich language and poor peasants, laughter and

tears, hope and despair, of what is real and what people think is real, in which neither the naked nor the clothed truth will out. It is set in a remote corner of County Mayo, and all credit to designer Tessa Curtis and the stage management crew for supplying such a superbly detailed shebeen, in which one can smell the bog water and the poteen.

Director Pat Gowman walks the wire between its comedy and apparent parricide without as much as a single slip in this hugely entertaining, engrossing, and earthy, piece of theatre.

Mark Fitzgerald makes

his mark as Christy Mahon, the "young gaffer who'd capsize the stars"; Paul Botly is suitably sodden as Michael Flaherty, a man "swamped and drowned with the weight of drink"; Kelvin West is splendid as the cowardly scarecrow Shawn Keogh of Killakeen; Joan Maynard is a formidable, tormenting, man-hungry Widow Quin; and Michael Gabe is excellent as the mortified and scalped Old Mahon.

But Marianne March, as the spirited Pegeen Mike, transcends them all in an inspired performance – the best seen on this stage so far this season.

Gazette LEISURE *plus*

■ Opening up a world of entertainment ■

Tall tales make heroes of loquacious drinkers

Playboy of the Western World, Questors Theatre, Ealing

MOST people would recoil in horror if a man had killed his father but in a desolate Irish community, where a good story is as important as a good drink, it's enough to make you a hero.

When runaway Christy Mahon tells the locals how he cracked open his father's skull and buried him in a potato field, he becomes the apple of the ladies' eyes, particularly the fiery Pegeen Mike. And all seems to go well for the unlikely hero until

his father arrives in town alive.

This exuberant tale of life in the Western World by J M Synge is a wonderful mix of funny, lyrical language, and a lively plot that brings an ironic and unpredictable ending to the play.

Life for the locals involves serious drinking, lots of laughter and horse racing in between the heavy farmwork and poverty.

Working on Tessa Curtis's impressive set of Michael Flaherty's shebeen, or unlicensed country pub, the cast, apart from a few suspect Irish

accents, gave a convincing performance.

Marianne March as Pegeen – “the fright of seven townlands for her biting tongue” – was excellent as the independent firebrand, as was newcomer Joan Maynard as the nosey Widow Quin, and Kelvin West as hapless Shawn Keogh.

The Playboy of the Western World is going on Questor's annual trip to Minack Theatre, Cornwall, next week and I'm sure audiences there won't be disappointed.

Wendy Richmond