



BEN BRANTLEY | THEATER REVIEW

A Storyteller's Private Dystopias

A drama and an installation conjure desperate characters.

THE FINE IRISH TRADITION of spinning a good yarn rattles with desperation in Enda Walsh's "Arlington," which has turned St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn into an electric shock ward for the narratively challenged. In this riveting fever dream of a play, which opened on Wednesday night, the three characters we meet are the human equivalents of caged songbirds.

Quarantined alone in an institutional chamber that suggests a waiting room in hell, with its fishless aquarium and pathetic plastic plant, the inhabitants of "Arlington" are coaxed, prodded and — if the word fits, and it does — tortured into what amounts to singing for their supper. And their sleep. And their very existence.

But just what are they supposed to say? It's not state secrets that their captors are after. Apparently, all that's required of these prisoners is that they shape remembrance of things past into entertaining anecdotes. That's a problem, though, when you're not even sure what your past was.

Storytelling under duress has long been the motor of Mr. Walsh's finest work. He is best known to mainstream



A young girl's room, part of Mr. Walsh's "Rooms" installation.

Credit Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

audiences for his Tony Award-winning book for the charming musical "Once," but his usual brand of whimsy is far more subversive.

In his "Bedbound," "Misterman," "Penelope" and the riotous "Walworth Farce," people spew long, convoluted reminiscences as if their lives depended upon it. And so they do, Mr. Walsh might argue, since it is through such deluded self-portraiture that we are able to function in a world always threatening to erase our identities.

Theatergoers desiring full immersion in this singular auteur's universe of unreliable narrators have before them both "Arlington" and an environmental theater project, "Rooms," also written and directed by Mr. Walsh. This haunting installation has been set up above a garage in the wild west of Midtown Manhattan, the future home of the Irish Arts Center. (The related theater works, produced by the center and St. Ann's Warehouse, are presented under the umbrella name "Enda Walsh in NYC.")

"Rooms" asks its audiences to step into three self-contained spaces (designed by Paul Fahy): a kitchen, a hotel room and a little girl's bedroom. They are precisely furnished chambers, shabby but tidy, that seem suspended in a murky twilight.

A distinct, self-hypnotized voice fills each room, describing its environment as a limbo where life is frozen, even as it drifts into nothingness. The voices belong to Charlie Murphy, Eileen Walsh and Niall Buggy, and they are guaranteed to take up residence in your head, too.

Creepy and compelling, contemplative and disturbing. Right in the director's wheelhouse.



Charlie Murphy, playing one of three characters in "Arlington."

Credit Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

The contemplative "Rooms" might be called disturbingly relaxing. There is nothing whatsoever soothing about "Arlington," which jolts the system through some of the most sophisticated visual and sound effects on display in New York. Jamie Vartan is the designer here.

But give full credit to an entire team — including Adam Silverman (lighting), Helen Atkinson (sound) and Jack Phelan (video) — that knows just how to play with our senses. Along with the composer Teho Teardo, whose music panders to our inner sentimentalists, these collaborators function as instruments of the Devil, or of the unseen arbiters of Mr. Walsh's version of an Orwellian future.

What they conjure is an ocean of images and noises, meant to urge the isolated souls in that infernal waiting room into describing life as it was. The subjects of these experiments are portrayed by Ms. Murphy (shattering as Isla, the only

character with a name), Oona Doherty and Hugh O'Connor, in bravura performances in which frantic but exactly staged movement becomes the embattled life force.

Emma Martin's choreography is as important to defining these desperate characters as are Mr. Walsh's warp-speed speeches. Dance is what remains of the spirit of resistance, and of an essence of individuality beyond the autobiographical spiels that are coerced from Ms. Murphy and Mr. O'Connor's characters. Ms. Doherty never says a word, as I recall, which is not to say that she isn't supremely eloquent.

For the first two-thirds of "Arlington," which runs a dense 85 minutes, the nature of the world that gave birth to this dystopia is revealed only by indirection. The effect is of an episode of "Black Mirror," the omnibus sci-fi series, scripted by Samuel Beckett.

Like the tramps of "Waiting for Godot," the residents

of "Arlington" hope for a deliverance that will surely never come, inventing histories of dubious provenance and authenticity. The difference is that Mr. Walsh's characters are denied even the comforts of companionship. And Isla and company are not waiting for deliverance by the disembodied Godot, but from an inhumanly human Big Brother (or perhaps Big Sister, as it develops).

In the play's final sequence, Mr. Walsh lets this entity explain itself, in a "how we got this way" history lesson, and I wish he hadn't, despite the dazzling video montage that accompanies the scene. It's as if Beckett had stepped aside to let J. J. Abrams take over the authorship.

The devil you don't know is always scarier than the devil you do. And such explicitness demystifies the production's seductive and sadistic air of nightmare verisimilitude.

As a whole, though, "Arlington" is as creepy and

compelling a vision of a blasted tomorrow as you're going to find these days, and there's plenty of competition around. And it's unconditionally true to Mr. Walsh's distinctive worldview, in which power comes from controlling the narrative.

At one point, Isla sees a silent loop from a talk show projected on the walls, and it causes her to wonder: "I can't reconcile why people would sit around on comfy seats and talk about what has already happened," she says. Perhaps, she adds, "they started talking about what could possibly happen: what a day could build into, the hope of that day, talking out their dreams in the way that people like me are told to talk them out — these lies."

Isla then slaps herself soundly. That kind of speculation isn't going to help a bit in a world where nobody owns her own story.

ROOMS

Cybert Tire, the future home of Irish Arts Center
726 11th Ave., Midtown West

Created by Enda Walsh, featuring the voices of Niall Buggy, Charlie Murphy and Eileen Walsh

ARLINGTON

St. Ann's Warehouse
45 Water St., Brooklyn

Written and directed by Enda Walsh; Choreography by Emma Martin