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THE Arts

This Zombie Won't Bite, but She'll Talk Your Ear Off

BY BEN BRANTLEY

Corpses freshly risen from their graves aren't usually as cozy as Her, the narrator in "Underneath," a solo performance piece by Pat Kinevane that wears death as if it were a quilted dressing gown. True, she — I mean, Her — looks every inch a fright when she first clammers out of her crypt. She is, after all, in an advanced state of putrefaction, and her rotting skin and clothes are the color of carbon.

But unlike the brain-eating undead who lumber through film and television these days, Her just wants to chat. She has a story to tell about a life shaped and destroyed by deformity, beauty and cruelty. Of course there will be many detours — into jokes, satirical re-enactments of reality television shows, and chin wags with audience members — before she calls it a night. Her may be deceased, but she's also Irish, and it takes more than not being alive to stop a garrulous Gaelic tongue.

"Underneath," which opened on Sunday night at the Irish Arts Center (and in Hell's Kitchen, wouldn't you know?), is an amiably meandering diversion for those who regard Halloween as a time for embracing the ghosts we run from the rest of the year. Mr. Kinevane, whose equally sepulchral "Silent" was seen in New York in 2012, is a monologist of untrammelled imagination, who loves to ferret out the poetic glitter in dark, dank corners.

Accordingly, in this 90-minute production, written and performed by Mr. Kinevane, from the Dublin-based Fishamble: The New Play Company, directed by Jim Culleton, Her is wearing more than dirt and shredded skin. Her lips and eyelids are painted gold, and every so often she wraps herself in gold lamé, posturing like a queen of the Nile. (Catherine Condell and Mariad Whisker designed the costumes.)

Nefertiti and Cleopatra are invoked as role models as Her tells her story. Not that Her would have ever been compared to any legendary beauty while she was alive. Disfigured by lightning when she was a girl, Her was ridiculed as a freak and a monster by her classmates in County Cork. But then the most



Pat Kinevane stars as an undead woman in "Underneath," which he also wrote, at the Irish Arts Center.

beautiful boy in her school, the scion of the town's richest family, befriended her, and thereby hangs a tale that would end in murder.

Mr. Kinevane isn't just here to tell ghost stories. There's an op-ed essay buried in his Gothic narrative, which becomes a pegboard for considerations of the undue merit the living world accords to attractive surfaces, while rejecting the ugly and misshapen.

It is one of the points of "Underneath" that beauty doesn't count for much among the dead, since golden boys and girls all come to dust, as Shakespeare had it. This play is in essence a sustained memento mori that asks us to see the skull beneath the human skin as a reminder of what ultimately links us all.

The attendant moralizing can feel a bit obvious and earthbound. But there are extraordinary spectral moments, both visual and aural, throughout that summon the beauty in conventional ugliness

and vice versa. Denis Clohessy has created rich, otherworldly music, and the show features an intricately layered soundscape in which Mr. Kinevane effectively sings duets with himself.

His long, sharply planed face and strapping body seem to exist here in a state of endless transition, melting into different degrees of delicacy and harshness as light and shadow wrap around them. The words Her speaks are similarly steeped in earthy prose and astral poetry, sometimes at the same time.

Certain descriptions snag the ear and linger. Of an uncle who sings in a choir, she says, "His voice was mahogany in my head." Her life is changed by "a crocodile twist of fate." She tells pretty good jokes, too, including one about a power standoff between Queen Elizabeth II and the pope.

For all its Gothic appurtenances, which extend to simple but effective sound-and-light shock effects, "Underneath" is most seductive as a minor but flavorful contribution to that great rushing river of Irish tale-telling, which continues to flow through the theater in works by dramatists like Conor McPherson and Sebastian Barry.

It's hard to resist any anecdote that starts with the kind of simple, ingeniously baited openers that Her provides. When she says, "So before the maggots, I lived in a flat near Croke Park in Dublin," you know it's time to sit back and enjoy the immortal process of a luxurious yarn unspooling.

"Underneath" continues through Nov. 1 at the Irish Arts Center, Manhattan; 866-811-4111; irishartscenter.org.



Pat Kinevane in "Underneath."

Credit Caitlin Ochs for The New York Times

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Review: ‘Underneath,’ an Embrace of Irish Ghosts

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