



Cast:

Michael - Andrew Bayliss
Kate - Sarah Campbell
Maggie - Emily Tuff
Agnes - Fay Staton
Rose - Caroline Maggs
Chris - Eleanor Adams
Gerry - Tom Garner
Jack - John Fenner

Director - Ann Brooks
Designer - John Ellam
Choreographer - Robin Stokoe

Performance to remember (Kenilworth Weekly News 27/4/12)

THE Talisman Theatre's production is an affectionate rendition of Brian Friel's most famous play.

Dancing at Lughnasa (pronounced LOO-na-SA) is a Chekhovian tragi-comedy set in County Donegal in 1936.

The story is recalled in flashback by Michael (Andrew Bayliss), lovechild to Christina, the youngest of five sisters living alone on their brother's farm.

As unmarried women, past the first flush of youth and living in a patriarchal society, the future is not promising, but they find pleasure in simple things'.

The reappearance of Michael's feckless father Gerry (Tom Garner) marks a turning point in their lives.

The play is a nostalgic recollection of a society that was rooted in Christian and pre-Christian traditions and beliefs, a homage to the women of that time and a bitter exposition of the effects of industrialisation that has at last caught up with them.

The cast deliver a strong ensemble performance. Sarah Campbell as Kate, the eldest sister, and Caroline Maggs as Rose were perhaps outstanding, though I suspect each member of the audience will have their favourite.

For my money, John Fenner, as Father Jack, delivered the performance of the night, a warm and sensitive study of conflicted beliefs.

I would have liked Gerry to be a little more worldly, but his dancing, like that of the whole cast, effortlessly conveyed the spirit of the play. Ann Brooks's direction honoured the script.

This is a play and a performance to remember and a worthy complement to Talisman's 70th birthday year celebrations.

Nick Le Mesurier

Dancing at Lughnasa (Elephant Jam © review)



Dancing at Lughnasa (pron. Loonasa) is a touching story of Irish country life in the 1930s that alternates between narration and action. The narration is conducted by Michael as a grown man reminiscing about the small house in which he lived with his mother and four aunts. The rest of the time the action takes place on the set – a representation of that house. In these scenes, the seven-year-old Michael's presence is mimed by the others and his words are spoken by the adult Michael from his position at the side.

The five sisters have a poor but contented lifestyle, and during the story this is interrupted by two men. One is old Uncle Jack, returned from many years of being a missionary in Uganda and finding it hard to adapt to life back at home. The other is Michael's lively but unreliable father, Gerry, who occasionally visits, proposes to Michael's mother, makes various promises and then departs to pursue his latest scheme for money or glory.

The overall feel is of the warmth that memory can bring as it glosses over hardships, and a longing for a lost past. The five sisters act as an ensemble with varying degrees of success, but are overall adequate and occasionally excellent. The two sisters who stood out were Sarah Campbell as eldest sister Kate, convincingly carrying their world on her shoulders at times, and Emily Tuff as the irrepressible Maggie. Andrew Bayliss played Michael skilfully, but I felt that his style was a little harsh and jarred somewhat with the warmth of the scenes, which were after all meant to be his memories.

But the story would not move along without the two visitors. Gerry was reasonably well played by Tom Garner, who had charisma and energy but lacked some naturalism. Jack was played by experienced hand John Fenner and it showed. His fond memories of his time in Uganda and the tribal gatherings and rituals he took part in were really captivating and delivered with a pleasant innocence, oblivious to the scandalising effect this was having on the Catholic sensibilities of the sisters, particularly Kate.

A pleasant evening out, but with a little more polish it could have been a must-see.



