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ENTERTAINMENT

## Theater: *The Weir* Still Haunts

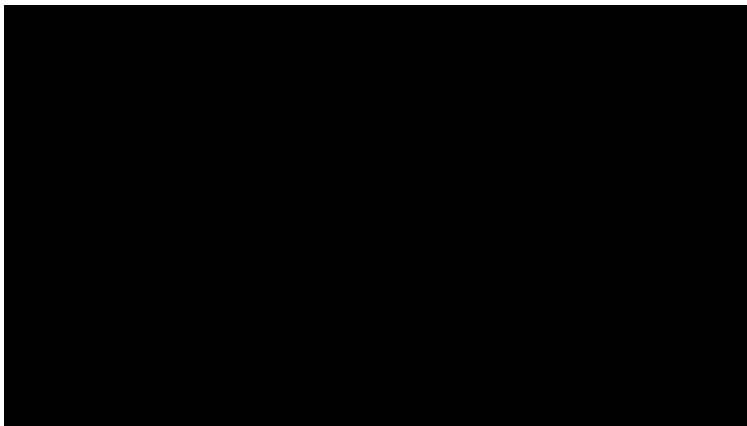
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**THE WEIR** \*\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
**IRISH REPERTORY THEATRE**

What better way for the Irish Repertory Theatre to celebrate its 25th anniversary season than this pitch-perfect revival of Conor McPherson's brilliant play *The Weir*? I saw the show in London when it was first produced, but it's only on a second viewing that I've truly grasped the shape and power of this disarmingly simple, entertaining and quietly devastating work.

McPherson is famed for his lengthy monologues and this play contains several doozies. They're ghost stories, but don't be waiting for spectral visions. All the chills that are delivered come strictly from your imagination.

The setting is a country pub in Ireland in 1997. The regulars shamble in for a pint on a cold, windy night. Brenden (Billy Carter) is the owner. Jack (Dan Butler of *Frasier*) is a prickly old codger and Jim (John Keating) is the quiet one who lives with and looks after his mother. All three are bachelors, married to the bar and their loneliness. Jack in particular has his hackles up over Finbar (Sean Gormley), a local who made good, at least financially. Always on the make, but not flash by any standards other than theirs, Finbar is squiring around a woman who has rented out a place he owns. Finbar is married, so of course Jack can picture him lording it over them. Here these sad fecks are sitting alone in a bar while he's married and yet he's still the only man to have a pretty young woman on his arm. They drink, they talk, they drink, and Finbar comes in with the woman Valerie (Tessa Klein) and the stories begin.



Finbar prods Jack into telling a story about the fairies that haunted a local house, not realizing it's the same house that Valerie has rented out. Jack slips into the story that took place a long time ago and has been handed down, a story about knocks on the door in the middle of the night, stories of a home built right on the path that the fairies take when they are migrating. It's a haunting, enigmatic, wonderful little tale with perfect touches, like the knock on the door that was lower down than you'd expect from a grown man or

woman.

That brings up another story and another. Each one is a haunting of some sort and each one is more recent in time. And each one has a perfectly natural explanation, of course, for anyone who wants to be sensible and discount the story. But what's the fun in that? Jim has a corker about being feverish and digging a grave in a churchyard in another county when a man comes up and insists the grave should be dug in another spot. The man he saw of course turns out to look exactly like the man who had died.

Finally, Valerie offers her own sad tale of a haunting, grateful not to feel crazy for claiming such a fantastical story. But ghosts are very fine in the distant past. A ghost today? That's another thing altogether, an upsetting and unwelcome idea and the men around her almost physically revolt against the idea as one, insisting it isn't true and wanting to explain it away. (This is also due to sympathy over the nature of her haunting.)

That leads to one more story, Jack's recounting of the woman he loved as a young man and let get away because he was too timid to move to Dublin. It's a final haunting about lost opportunity and Butler delivers it beautifully. The first time I saw the play, that story seemed out of place. But this time around -- or simply because this production is so solid -- I can see how well structured the show is, how each story becomes more and more personal and moving.

Like a true ensemble, no one stands out because everyone is uniformly good and working for the play, not their own performances. Gormley doesn't overdo the big man on campus aura of Finbar and Klein is spot on as Valerie. Carter in some ways has the trickiest role to keep vital, since the bartender is constantly balancing the needs of everyone around him. I've seen Butler on stage a number of times; this is the best I've ever seen him. (All credit to the dialect coach Stephen Gabis; to my untutored ears they all sound natural and unaffected in their dialects.) John Keating has been memorable in every part I've seen him in, however small. Here in the meatiest role yet, he's excellent yet again. His goodbye to Valerie is so simple and honest and direct, it about breaks your heart. Someone soon will wise up and cast him in the breakout role he deserves.

The set (Charlie Corcoran), the costumes (Leon Dobkowski), the lighting (Michael Gottlieb) and the sound design (Drew Levy) are all top-notch. How hard can it be to build one set, a small Irish pub and clothe the characters? And yet, how often do sets seem bulky or awkward or unconvincing? Here we never question a single detail, right down to the whistling wind outside. How easy it would be for the sound design to call attention to itself or go on a split second too long and turn a haunting story into something more obvious and uninteresting. Instead, it remains balanced just so.

Director Ciaran O'Reilly deserves credit for molding this cast and crew into a true team that makes the most of McPherson's play. It's only 90 minutes long but you're so drawn in to this world and these people and their stories that you'll look at your watch when it's over and be surprised it went so fast. And with all the drinking on stage ("Just a small one," they say, again and again and again) you might even have a pleasant little buzz on the way out. If nothing else, you'll feel the buzz of live theater and a story you know will be told onstage for many years to come.

NOTE: Surely the Irish Rep can use every penny so people should feel free to indulge at the tiny bar beforehand. But the bowl of free candy they place on the counter is about as foolish a thing as I've seen. It's hard candy with crinkly wrappers so of course throughout the entire show, clueless audience members who grabbed a handful kept unwrapping their candies and making enough noise to wake the dead. For heaven's sake, either find candy to offer that comes in paper (like Tootsie Rolls) or better yet, don't put out the free candy until people are on their way out. A nice bowl with butterscotch candies that people can take on their way home after a great bit of theater would be very welcome. Actually encouraging people to take candies guaranteed to distract everyone during the show is absurd and must end.

**THE THEATER 2013** (on a four star scale)

*The Other Place* \*\* 1/2  
*Picnic* \* 1/2  
*Opus No. 7* \*\* 1/2  
*Deceit* \* 1/2  
*Life And Times Episodes 1-4* \*\*  
*Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* (w Scarlett Johansson) \* 1/2  
*The Jammer* \*\*\*  
*Blood Play* \*\* 1/2  
*Manilow On Broadway* \*\* 1/2  
*Women Of Will* \*\* 1/2  
*All In The Timing* \*\*\*  
*Isaac's Eye* \*\*\*  
*Bunnica: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery* \*\* 1/2  
*The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County* \* 1/2  
*Much Ado About Nothing* \*\*\*  
*Really Really* \*  
*Parsifal at the Met* \*\*\* 1/2  
*The Madrid* \* 1/2  
*The Wild Bride at St. Ann's* \*\* 1/2  
*Passion at CSC* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Carousel at Lincoln Center* \*\*\*  
*The Revisionist* \*\*  
*Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella* \*\*\*  
*Rock Of Ages* \* 1/2  
*Ann* \*\* 1/2  
*Old Hats* \*\*\*  
*The Flick* \*\*\*  
*Detroit '67* \*\* 1/2  
*Howling Hilda* reading \* (Mary Testa \*\*\*)  
*Hit The Wall* \*  
*Breakfast At Tiffany's* \* 1/2  
*The Mound Builders* at Signature \*  
*Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Cirque Du Soleil's Totem* \*\*\*  
*The Lying Lesson* \* 1/2  
*Hands On A Hardbody* \*  
*Kinky Boots* \*\*  
*Matilda The Musical* \*\*\* 1/2  
*The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream* \*\*\*  
*Motown: The Musical* \*\*  
*La Ruta* \*\* 1/2  
*The Big Knife* \*  
*The Nance* \*\*\*  
*The Assembled Parties* \*\* 1/2  
*Jekyll & Hyde* \* 1/2  
*Thoroughly Modern Millie* \*\* 1/2  
*Macbeth w Alan Cumming* \*  
*Orphans* \*\* 1/2  
*The Testament Of Mary* \*\* 1/2  
*The Drawer Boy* \*\*  
*The Trip To Bountiful* \*\*\*  
*I'll Eat You Last* \*\* 1/2  
*Pippin* \*  
*This Side Of Neverland* \*\*\*  
*A Public Reading Of An Unproduced Screenplay About The Death Of Walt Disney* \*\*\*  
*Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812* \*\*\*  
*Colin Quinn Unconstitutional* \*\* 1/2  
*A Family For All Occasions* \*  
*The Weir* \*\*\* 1/2

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**Note:** Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.

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