

# Theater: Transport Does Not

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**TRANSPORT** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**THE IRISH REPERTORY THEATRE**

This ambitious new musical is set on board a ship in 1838. A group of female convicts are being forcibly transported from their homes in Ireland to the penal colony of Australia, where they'll serve out their time and serve as a release valve for the predominantly male population. Like the men waiting for them, the women are mostly innocent and undeserving of their fate; it's one more bitter trial thanks to the despised British.

The book is by Thomas Keneally of Schindler's List, the music and lyrics are by Larry Kirwan of beloved New York City band Black 47, the set and direction are by multiple Tony winner Tony Walton and the results are unsatisfying and too problematic to use even the polite term "promising."

For starters the women are neatly diverse in their backgrounds and complaints, too obviously "types." Pearl Rhein plays Bride Riordan, the sensible one who serves as a surgeon's assistant. Jessica Grove is Kate, the fiery redhead who fights with everyone and urges rebellion. Terry Donnelly is the mad old Maggie, constantly having visions and pronouncing doom. And Emily Skeggs is Polly, a Protestant with a newborn babe who resists all offers of help from these Papists.

Will they bond? Will romance blossom between crew members and the women? Will the baby survive? Will someone go overboard? Few surprises are in store here. It doesn't help that most of the women were cast for their acting, not their singing. Grove is the one with the notable voice; the rest are shakier and act their way through the songs. Thanks to a combination of weak singing and what seem to be weak melodies that haven't been adjusted (quite a few tunes find the singers straining for a note), we're left with a score notably lacking. While the book is rather cliched, you're usually waiting for the songs to end and the talking to begin.

It seems churlish to say, but in this fascinating setting, it's the men that are more vivid and real, perhaps because they aren't so baldly delineated. The captain (Mark Coffin) and the rebellious priest resigned to his fate (Sean Gormley) are too vague to make an impression. But Edward Watts as Surgeon Delamare and the handsome Patrick Cummings as sailor Hennessy (sporting a set of gleaming teeth even the nobility of the era would have envied) are far more specific and believable and have the best pipes to boot, with Cummings in particular coming into his own in the second act.

But even they can't navigate the fast-paced changes in this 105-minute story. In Hennessy's first scene, he's so abusive and lascivious, I figured he'd be the villain of the piece. In the next, he's sweet and romantic while telling the same woman he harassed that she's stolen his heart. When Kate urges on mutiny, shouldn't Hennessy (or someone) point out that if they killed the captain they'd likely be stranded on the ocean with no one else possessing the skill to get them to America in those days before safe and simple navigation? The dotty old psychic Maggie is suddenly wailing over her fondness for a perished female passenger even though I don't think she said more than a word in passing to the girl the entire show. The captain firmly states his opinion about the surgeon's proposed marriage in one scene (it's beneath the man and beneath contempt) and in the next suggests he be the best man at their wedding. Huh? At the least, shouldn't the captain have watched their duet declaring love and be seen to soften?

Even if you don't have the slightest interest in Australia, *The Fatal Shore* by Robert Hughes will entertain and

fascinate you with the early years of that continent when the world began to encroach via convicts and the desperate. Keneally and Kirwan have lit upon another intriguing aspect -- the arrival of women as the Great Hunger loomed large in Ireland. A few spirited tunes aside ("Hotter Here Beside Me," "The Roaring Forties"), they've not managed to do more than turn this tale into soap opera.

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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.