

A classroom culture clash in *The Dead School*

By Henry Hitchings, Evening Standard 25.02.10
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The Dead School

Tricycle Theatre
Kilburn High Road, NW6 7JR

★★★★☆ Henry Hitchings's rating

★★★★☆ Reader rating

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Dir: Padraic McIntyre.

Cast: Peter Daly, Carrie Crowley, Sean Campion, Gemma Reeves



Mischief maker: Pete Daly as one of the pupils

The Dead School is a feast of madness — a carnival of quirks, part *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and part Daliesque foray into the backwoods of psychosis.

Patrick McCabe is a dark and often hilarious chronicler of Irish manners, and this adaptation by him of a novel he published 15 years ago is disorderly, surreal and effervescent.

The two main characters are Raphael Bell, an authoritarian teacher, and Malachy Dudgeon, the small-town boy he recruits to work alongside him. Bell finds Malachy wanting. They fall out. Then, in true McCabe style, madness encroaches.

The story unfurls with something not far shy of incoherence, and I spent the first half an hour, if not more, thinking it inexcusably strange and shouty — only to find myself suddenly attuned to its cranky dynamics.

The frame of reference is concertedly Irish, by which I mean there are layers of humour that will be lost on members of the audience who are not Irish. But the richness is startling — to the extent that one hunts for occult significance where it's probably not intended.

For instance, at one point the word "poetry" is written on a blackboard. The space left in the middle makes it look more like "poe" and "try", and it's tempting to think we are supposed to try to see the influence of Edgar Allan Poe's imagery of claustrophobia and nostalgia.

This may be a stretch but McCabe addresses a multitude of themes: the rigidity of tradition, the eccentricities of teachers and their methods, the turbid nature of memory, and the way that music, supposedly a force for cohesion, can fragment society and propagate insanity.

Although Padraic McIntyre's production is at times mannered, there are moments of astonishing theatre and poignant immediacy, and when the manic energy lets up there's a stillness that allows the characters' personal tragedies to resonate.

There's also ingenuity, which complements the verbal opulence of McCabe's writing, and McIntyre's detailed vision is superbly evoked in Maree Kearns's marvellously grotty set and Barry McKinney's skilful lighting.

Sean Champion's performance as Raphael, a man traumatised by his past, is meaty and intricate. Nick Lee's Malachy is touching — anarchic yet humane — and the supporting actors such as Pete Daly and Carrie Crowley are versatile, with Crowley particularly vivid.

The result, though too long, is brave and sumptuously imaginative. It's guaranteed to baffle but also to beguile.

Until 13 March. Information: 020 7328 1000.