

The Dead School

Venue: [Tricycle Theatre](#)

Where: Inner London

Date Reviewed: 25 February 2010

WOS Rating: ★★★★★

Average Reader Rating: ★★★★★

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In adapting his 1995 novel for the stage, [Pat McCabe](#) acknowledges the debt *The Dead School* owes to Tadeusz Kantor's *The Dead Class*, that haunting Polish masterpiece of ancient memories of desk-bound childhood.

The Irish equivalent is even more bizarre as it squeezes the mythology of Catholic values in education to near death in the converging stories of an old-fashioned relic, the shambling, violent primary school headmaster Raphael Bell from Cork, and his younger counterpart, Malachy Dudgeon.

In the wake of James Joyce, you'd hardly expect any revisionist denials of the shortcomings in the Dublin education system, but McCabe paints a vivid and shocking picture of submission and warped sentiment, brilliantly captured in the hollowed-out husk of a heart-breaking, stony-faced performance by [Sean Campion](#) as Raphael, covered in chalk dust, eaten with emotional inadequacy, flaring into cane-wielding virulence.

"How would you like to be buried with my people?" is his mind-boggling marriage proposal on the Giant's Causeway; then Malachy's old da is seen storming off to the lake to toss himself in while a neighbour rogers his wife from behind in the garden shed. It's a grim, warped view of sex and marriage we have here, all part of the Irish way of death which starts in a disgusted view of the natural process of childbirth.

School hymns, the Legion of Mary, the bowel-straining lyricism of Count John McCormack: all the old shibboleths are in place, but Raphael is also possessed by the memory of a young boy who lit up the school concerts, while Malachy – played with a very different kind of quivering earthiness by [Nick Lee](#) – is driven mad by his wife's socialist, liberated jabber and the death of a child who drowned on his watch.

[Padraic McIntyre](#)'s stunning production for the Livin' Dred touring company – based in Virginia, County Cavan – transforms the familiar Irish tropes of sanctimony and despair in the sheer force and brilliance of its execution. The narrative converges on [Maree Kearns](#)'s magnificently grimy and dilapidated classroom set after splitting at the point of Raphael's death, making supple demands on an audience's attention.

Apart from Campion – half the original *Stones in His Pockets* duo – giving the performance of his life, he and Lee are superbly supported by the quick-changing virtuosity of [Carrie Crowley](#), [Gemma Reeves](#) and [Peter Daly](#) as children, housewives, priests and parents, Daly doubling as the pig-faced beggar man who hovers at the window like a household devil.

- by [Michael Coveney](#)

Reader Reviews

Score	Comment	Date
★★★★★	It helps to know the background story as the first act is quite confusing even if you do know. The two males are a traditionalist teacher and a younger teacher with more modern ideas. The ensemble acting, timing and characterisation are superb and the dramatisation startlingly imaginative. Excellent set as always at the Tricycle but utilised to particular dramatic effect here. Didn't always understand the odd Irish phrase. Would hesitate to recommend it to everyone because of its unusual structure, but an absolutely first class production in every way. - <i>kilburncat</i>	23 Feb 10