

THE DEAD SCHOOL

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Backstage Theatre, Longford

The Dead School opens with an image of the aftermath, but Pat McCabe's disturbing play is only beginning. Set in the derelict living room of schoolteacher Raphael Bell, the fragmented drama dances between the past and the present of the haunted schoolmaster, who has finally succumbed to the madness that has been stalking him throughout his life.

McCabe's adaptation of his 1995 novel is bold in its experimentation with form, translating the vivid imagery of his prose into rich, physical theatrical metaphors, while confidently using music and song as a key structural and expositional tool.

Although *The Dead School* is firmly set in Ireland in the 1970s, to emphasise the decaying social fabric as the catalyst for incipient madness would do McCabe a disservice, because *The Dead School's* astute social observation is perhaps less vital than the play's relentless, exhausting representation of mental illness, which brilliantly captures the complexity and chaos of a disintegrating mind.

Director Padraic McIntyre harnesses the crazy energy of the piece and, with his supreme control over the complex material, creates a coherent and visually arresting production. The cast is brilliantly choreographed in sequences of restless movement, but there are moments where the action slows down too, pausing in contemplation with images of transient beauty and foreboding: the still of a wedding photograph, a frozen dance.

Maree Kearns's stunning subsiding set is endlessly inventive, opening up like a gothic doll's house to reveal the hidden spaces of the mind where madness lurks. Her costume design is equally remarkable, adding to the playful texture of the production's aesthetic, which enriches the encroaching ominous denouement with delicious irony.

That there are only five actors employed in creating McCabe's vivid, sprawling world is almost astonishing. Sean Campion, Carrie Crowley, Peter Daly, Eamon Owens and Gemma Reeves display remarkable vigour over two and half hours, as they appear and reappear like spectres or puppets, crouching underneath desks, towering over the schoolroom.

The unnerving intensity of Campion's performance is especially unsettling, the measure of a man slowly losing his mind.

If the second half of the play drags a bit, it is because the double-plot that opens up threatens to undo the carefully balanced tension through repetition. However, McIntyre and his tireless cast maintain unyielding tight control as *The Dead School* unravels to its bleak and powerful finale. -

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