

# Haunting lesson of 'The Dead School'

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We still revere the old style of "education" in Ireland, and revere the men who presided over it. Their successful product was the child with an endless capacity for absorbing received prejudice as wisdom, and spewing it out undigested throughout life; the larger the "sponge", the greater the intellectual. Pat McCabe taught in that "rote and repetition" system, and he loathes it. The Dead School is his commentary on it and what it did to pupils and teachers alike.

But McCabe doesn't stop there: we've replaced the old system with a series of politically correct platitudes, he suggests, ticking off boxes as mindlessly as ever the old masters beat catechetical incantations into children.

We still don't know how to open minds; and we're still destroying children and their teachers.

McCabe has rewritten his play from the production for Macnas of a number of years ago, and it's now been given a touring production by Nomad and Livin' Dred, based in Longford and visiting Mullingar, Dundalk, Castleblaney, Roscommon, Virginia and Drogheda until December 3. And it's a corker of a production, with Sean Campion heading the cast as Master Raphael Bell, a man uneasily at war with a system that has consumed him helplessly but hasn't given him the tools to resist in any meaningful manner.

It's a wonderful characterisation by author and actor alike as the old man sinks into confusion and misery, what he sees as the old decencies abandoned, while having to watch the embodiment of the new world, young Master Malachy Dudgeon, destroyed by his attempts at cool oneness with his pupils as surely as he himself has been destroyed by the old ways.

The entire cast of Eamon Owens as Dudgeon, Carrie Crowley as Mrs Bell, Gemma Reeves as Dudgeon's girlfriend, and Peter Daly as the priest and the menacing Little Beggarman of Death give seamlessly terrific support under Padraic McIntyre's direction. But the play is Campion's: the performance is haunting.

Maree Kearns designs with lighting by Barry McKinney, and Olwen Grindley is responsible for the successful subtleties of choreography.