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Eye Section
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The Seafarer: Holiday Tale Minus the Mush

An inspiring tale of redemption at San Jose Stage

By Karen D'Souza

The road to hell is paved with high spirits in "The Seafarer."

The art of intoxication is both celebrated and vilified in Conor McPherson's heady new drama, a tale of two brothers drinking themselves to death one Guinness at a time.

One of the most potent Irish playwrights today, McPherson has become the bard of the supernatural. In "The Weir," he spun a yarn of ghosts and grief. In "Shining City," he spliced the world of the living and the dead.

Now, in "The Seafarer," he beats the devil at his own game, shuffling a lethal deck of cards, booze and damnation. One of the most visceral San Jose Stage Company plays in recent memory, "Seafarer" will restore your faith in the healing power of holiday theater, which is all too often relegated to the realm of treacle.

The Emerald Isle has never been wetter than in the home of the perpetually pickled Richard (the inimitable Julian López-Morillas) and Sharky (Randall King), who live in a squalid hovel littered with bottles, cans and drunkards. Benders are a way of life here. The favorite drink is Irish coffee, minus the coffee.

An inveterate old sot, Richard was so pie-eyed he tumbled into a garbage dumpster, banged his head and woke up blind. Now a tottering mass of fear and revulsion, he holds court in the squalid living room like a grizzled Falstaff gone to seed. López-Morillas revels in the perverse subtleties of a monster part that captures addiction in all its grimy glory.

Moaning with ecstasy at the first drop of the day, Richard can't be bothered with details, like bathing or civility to his erstwhile caretaker brother. Sharky, a pugnacious lout who has had the fight pummeled out of him by life, tries vainly to climb out of his cups one fateful Christmas Eve. His best-laid plans go awry when

they are visited by Mr. Lockhart (Kevin Blackton), a man of wealth and taste with an infernal temper.

This is a Faustian pact fraught with old Irish lore and scabrous postmodern wit. The playwright lights this dark parable with incendiary insights into the culture of drinking, the toxic link between fraternity and debauchery. McPherson's love for his characters, his deep and abiding sense of empathy for their suffering at the cruel hands of destiny, wins us over.

While director Kimberly Mohne Hill occasionally lets the rich musicality of the text wane and the lads have a spot of bother with the accents here and there, this is a deeply engrossing tragicomedy that's as funny as it is fierce.

Colin Thomson shows off exquisite comic timing as the hapless bottle fiend Ivan. López-Morillas, reprising a role he played at Marin Theatre Company last year, steals every scene with a symphony of sighs and bile. Blackton nails the elegance of evil, if he misses some of the menace that should lace this endgame. King delivers a quietly reflective performance that casts the rest of the ensemble into high relief until Sharky slouches toward his shattering moment of atonement.

"The Seafarer"
By Conor McPherson

The Upshot: A high-stakes game of cards, booze and redemption in its intoxicating local premiere

Where: San Jose Stage Company, 490 S. First St., San Jose

When: Nov. 18-Dec. 20

Running Time: 2 hours, 30 minutes (one intermission)

Tickets: \$20-\$45;
408-283-7142;
www.thestage.org