

Theater

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SHOW OF THE WEEK

REACH OUT AND TOUCH SOMEONE Cox phones home.

A Behanding in Spokane

Martin McDonagh's U.S. foray falls a few digits short. By **Kris Vire**

★★★★★

Profiles Theatre (see Resident companies). By Martin McDonagh. Dir. Rick Snyder. With Darrell W. Cox, Eric Burgher, Sara Greenfield, Levenix Riddle. 1hr 30mins; no intermission.

Martin McDonagh's latest is the Irish playwright's first to be set not in Connemara (as in *A Skull in*) or Leenane (*The Beauty Queen of*) or Inishmaan (*The Cripple of*) or Inishmore (*The Lieutenant of*) but in the United States. Profiles' Chicago premiere opens on a familiar sight: a fantastically creepy Darrell W. Cox.

Twice this fall, to accommodate a pair of emergency eye surgeries undergone by Cox, Profiles postponed its production of *A Behanding in Spokane* rather than recast the role. This suggests the theater and the director, Rick Snyder, considered Cox—the most consistent presence on Profiles' stage over the years—uniquely indispensable to its take on McDonagh's script, just as Christopher Walken was regarded as crucial to the play's Broadway debut last year.

Unfortunately, as Walken's reportedly did in New York, Cox's unsettling presence fails to entirely enliven a script that falls surprisingly flat for much of its first half. Cox plays Carmichael, a one-handed man on a psychotically single-minded mission to recover what he says was taken

from him, unprovoked, by a gang of hillbillies who held his hand down over a Spokane train track as a passing locomotive lopped it off. The gang then retrieved the paw and, escaping the scene, waved good-bye to him with his own hand.

The numerous gaping holes in that tale, which Carmichael tells early on to his prisoners Toby (Levenix Riddle) and Marilyn (Sara Greenfield), add fuel to our uneasiness with Carmichael's presence: Could this even possibly be true? Does Carmichael truly believe his own story, or is it some kind of insane justification for decades of collecting severed human appendages?

Toby and Marilyn are smallest-time con artists who've severely underestimated their intended prey, offering Carmichael a hand they've stolen from a local museum. Like Toby, the hand is black, allowing for the avowedly racist Carmichael to unleash a deadening torrent of the N-word.

Cox, as Profiles audiences know, has "menacing" down. But he doesn't bring to Carmichael the same kind of loopy unpredictability that's Walken's calling card. Cox's Carmichael seems, if anything, too measured in his disappointment, too reasonable in his sadism as he handcuffs Toby and Marilyn to the radiator and leaves a slow-burning candle in the open mouth of a gasoline

can beyond their reach. Cox drains the comedy from the situation.

Thus Toby and Marilyn's screeching, terrified reactions seem equally justified and less than entertaining. The heightened level at which Snyder's production spends its first half takes the Profiles aesthetic from assertive to assaultive. The sustained frantic shouting in the small space begins to ring in your ears; Greenfield in particular edges toward shrill.

But McDonagh's biggest trip-up is the show's fourth character, a hotel clerk with an apparent death wish. He seems like little more than a convenient plot device throughout, at

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no fault of his portrayer, the appealingly mealy-mouthed Eric Burgher. (It'd be interesting to see Burgher as Carmichael in a few years.) The clerk, Mervyn, gets one terrific monologue at the play's midpoint, but like the character, it feels shoehorned in.

Perhaps *Behanding's* weakness comes from its lack of one of McDonagh's great strengths in plays from the Leenane trilogy to *The Pillowman*: corrosively sour-sweet familial relationships. The play's best dialogue is a one-sided one, as Carmichael has it out with his batty and batty-making mother on the hotel phone, suggesting a pairing as entertaining as *Inishmaan's* Johnypateenmike and his Mammy.

The Doyle and Debbie Show

★★★★★

Royal George Theatre (see Touring shows). Created by Bruce Arntson. With Arntson, Jenny Littleton, Matthew Carlton. 1hr 40mins; no intermission.

"I believe in the three r's," says Debbie (Jenny Littleton) in the spoken-interlude portion of the mock anthem "For the Children." "*R* children *r r* future." In Debbie's Tennessee-mountain twang, of course, this goofy-smart our-are gag sounds just right—and vitally, Littleton sells it with the utmost conviction. That seriousness of satire drives *The Doyle and Debbie Show*, a sort of live mockumentary on loan from Nashville, where it's a long-running hit.

Doyle (Bruce Arntson) is a washed-up vendor of old-school country music, a small-time aspirant to the Grand Ole Opry who's on his third Debbie. His latest partner, who we're told is making her Nashville debut this evening, is a small-town single mother Doyle discovered singing in a VFW hall. Together with their sidekick and accompanist, Buddy (Matthew Carlton), they regale us with Doyle's greatest hits: masterful parody songs with titles like "Barefoot and Pregnant" and "When You're Screwing Other Women (Think of Me)."

The songs lovingly and hilariously skewer the tropes of the genre, and the performers render them with precision. Arntson delivers an expert rendition of the sequined-showman archetype, while Littleton shows off impressive vocal mimicry, evoking songstresses from Dolly Parton to Tammy Wynette. Scenic designer Kevin Depinet has done a crackerjack job of transforming the Royal George's cabaret space into a dingy, yellowed country & western dive reminiscent of the real-life Station Inn, the show's Nashville home. The show goes off the rails a bit in an overreaching supernatural sequence near the end, but for the most part it milks hearty laughs from solid satire and committed character work.

—Kris Vire



FRINGE BENEFITS
Littleton and Arntson twang on.

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