

# The New Electric Ballroom by Enda Walsh

By Jennie Fitzhardinge February 18, 2009 - 1:38PM



Patsy (Mikel Murfi), the village fishmonger.

Irish playwright Enda Walsh is one of those playwrights who in 20 years' time people will be boasting about having seen his work at the Perth International Arts Festival "before he was famous".

Although strictly speaking it wouldn't be true – he has already won fame for his theatre and film work, including winning the Edinburgh Fringe Festival First Award twice – most recently for *The New Electric Ballroom* in 2008.

Walsh's fierce yet funny play tells the story of three house-bound sisters who are trapped in a cage of words of their own making.

The play opens in the claustrophobic confines of three sisters' living room where the two older sisters, "bad girl" Breda (a masterful Rosealeen Linehan) and "pudgy" Clara (Ruth McCabe) are caught in a cycle of telling the same story over and over again of how at *The New Electric Ballroom* they experienced their greatest hopes and disappointments.

Like a child with a favourite bedtime story, the youngest sister Ada (Catherine Walsh) demands its retelling, even though she knows each sister's version of the story, word for word, and each retelling keeps her as trapped as her sisters.

In Walsh's hands language is a weapon that can entrap or liberate, depending on who uses it.

The scenes he sets as the sisters describe cycling through the town to the Ballroom, or in Ada's case daily to the cannery where she works as a bookkeeper "turning fish into

numbers” reminded me of that other seaside village, Dylan Thomas’s Under Milkwood.

The sisters use words to hold a village at bay where they imagine people are still gossiping about what happened all those years ago.

When they do stop they are instantly uneasy. “There’s a lull in the conversation,” Clara says. “It’s the sort of lull that can get you worrying about other things.”

Then Patsy (Mikel Murfi), the village fishmonger driven half-mad with loneliness and longing, bursts in with his delivery of fish – and for the audience, some comic relief as he regales the sisters with an update on the rest of the town that they don’t want to hear.

But even he is stuck in the same daily repetition. When he threatens not to come back to the house, Breda snaps, “You’ll come with the tide.”

But change happens no matter how you try to talk it away and Walsh brings the play to its climax with a change as unpredictable as it is blackly funny.

In a packed Festival program that includes Irish great Samuel Beckett’s Fragments and a tour de force performance from Helen Morse in Joan Didion’s A Year of Magical Thinking, Walsh’s play holds its own as a must-see event. Don’t miss it.

**The New Electric Ballroom**  
**Written and Directed by Enda Walsh**  
**Performed by Druid**  
**Playhouse Theatre until Feb 25, Tickets \$25-\$45**