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## PERTH INTERNATIONAL ARTS FESTIVAL

# Sharply honed dose of Irish purgatory

**A**NATION as deeply in love with words as Ireland would be hard to find. From Synge and Wilde to Joyce and Beckett, Irish playwrights have poured out torrents of dazzling drama. And now, some critics say, there's a worthy successor in Dublin-born writer Enda Walsh.

Walsh is one of the most widely performed writers in Ireland, according to the program notes to his play *The New Electric Ballroom*. Beyond that, the notes leave you clueless about what you are about to see.

A precis of this quirky, absurdist play would have helped far more than extended quotes from a PhD thesis about Walsh's way of working with directors.

The lack of a precis is no trivial matter: the play opens with one of three middle-aged sisters ranting into a corner at machinegun speed, only half audibly and in an accent that takes many minutes to attune one's ear to.

A similar problem blighted enjoyment of Druid Theatre's 2005 Perth Festival offering,

### THEATRE

#### **The New Electric Ballroom**

By Enda Walsh. Druid Theatre Company. Playhouse Theatre, Perth, February 17. Tickets: \$25-\$45. Bookings: (08) 9484 1133. Until February 25.

*The Playboy of the Western World*, in which some frustrated patrons left at interval muttering about not understanding a word.

Druid's second visit to Perth last year, with the two-hander play *Trad*, was more successful, tickling the audience with hilariously exaggerated tales about Irish rural poverty so bad that a farmer ploughed with his eyelids and was soon "dead due to erosion".

*The New Electric Ballroom* is a tale of high excitement followed by howling despair. It is superbly performed by Rosaleen Linehan, Ruth McCabe, Catherine Walsh and Mikel Murfi, who plays a nervy, love-struck fishmonger with consummate skill.

In a remote fishing village, we meet two housebound sisters who devote their waking hours to re-enacting fateful moments at the New Electric Ballroom, youthful events that broke their hearts and shattered dreams for a different life.

With the help of the smelly fishmonger Patsy, they induct the youngest sister, Ada, into that same lipstick-smear tragedy.

Walsh's writing is as eccentric, sharply honed and shattering as any bardic storytelling or Beckettian absurdist play. But one can't suppress a nagging thought: why is Irish life so routinely, almost predictably, portrayed as a living purgatory? Aren't there any happy endings in Dublin or Galway?

And although it seems churlish to say it, this reviewer sat thinking that three Druid shows in five years at the Perth Festival, while a privilege to watch, are an ample sufficiency for a while.

Victoria Laurie