



Corrosive effects of longing

THEATRE

The New Electric Ballroom
 By Enda Walsh
 Druid Theatre Company
 Playhouse Theatre
 Review: Ron Banks

Enda Walsh's *The New Electric Ballroom* is an ideal companion piece to fellow Irish writer Samuel Beckett's *Fragments* as part of the Festival.

Both writers deal with the futility of existence, the corrosive effects of longing and despair and the search for love in ways that are bleakly funny.

It could almost be said that the much younger Walsh has learnt his absurdist craft from Beckett, so surreal and bizarre are some of the encounters between the three sisters in this ultimately moving and clever tale set in an Irish fishing village.

Where Walsh differs is in his word play. There is none of the sparse, minimalist dialogue of Beckett in Walsh's script, which is filled with words that tumble from the sisters' lips in torrents.

The play begins with a long monologue of despair about life and religion delivered by the elder sister Breda (Rosaleen Linehan) with her face turned towards the wall of their sparsely furnished living room, which somewhat bizarrely backs on to the coolroom of the local cannery.

The monologue is later repeated by her sister Clara (Ruth McCabe),



Wistfully crafted: Mikel Murfi in *The New Electric Ballroom*.

suggesting the family have internalised their view of life and the stasis of their lonely existence.

These middle-aged women are trapped in a present that has no future, no optimism about the capacity for change within the human psyche. Instead, they endlessly refer to the past and the high point of their younger selves — the time they cycled 15km to the New Electric Ballroom and a sexual encounter with the lead singer of the dance band, a handsome man in a blue Elvis Presley suit.

But life has not fulfilled this early promise of sex and romance, and a crabbed, confined reliance on memory and former glories has set in with the older two sisters, who pass on their experiences as a cautionary tale to their younger sister Ada (Catherine Walsh).

Ada has a suitor of sorts in the local fishmonger Patsy (Mikel Murfi)

who, like the local tide, makes sudden appearances through the coolroom door with fish.

Patsy has the same low levels of self-esteem as the three sisters, and tries to cover his loneliness with words, one-sided conversations spewing from him in a garrulous stream about the townsfolk he has observed on his wanderings.

Walsh's dialogue is clever and funny, with an undertow of sadness and the terror of existence that makes this play as poignant as any other Irish play we've seen in the Festival in recent years.

The accomplished female cast members are entirely convincing as these bleakly sad women who hold on to life grimly without the resources to effect personal change. For them the past is the only reality, and it is best not to think of the future.

Murfi's Patsy matches them in intensity in his desire to cover the loneliness and pointlessness of existence with words, and his transformation towards the end into a ballroom singer is wonderfully strange and hauntingly powerful. So, too, is his final wooing of Ada, where he glimpses the hope of a future filled with love, only to snatch it away from himself through his own sense of the terror of life.

The New Electric Ballroom is strange, wistful, wonderfully crafted theatre.

***The New Electric Ballroom* runs until Wednesday.**