

A Wallop of Irish muscle

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A sudden shock. A numbing pain. A rush of adrenaline.

That's what your body experiences after a physical assault, and your spirit is likely to go through the same three stages after seeing *A Whistle in the Dark*, which opened at the Berkeley St. Theatre Upstairs on Saturday night.

Superb acting from a powerhouse cast and taut, economical direction combine with a tough-minded script to create the most muscular piece of theatre we've seen in Toronto in some time.

Tom Murphy's 1961 drama about the Carneys, a family of Irish emigres living in Coventry, is here receiving its professional Canadian premiere, and it makes up in guts what it lacks in finesse.

Michael is the one who "got away" and left the dead-end bog back in County Mayo that was swallowing the rest of his family. He married a British girl, Betty and tried to build a new life.

But three of his brothers moved in with him – and poisoned his home with their destructive behaviour. Drinking, brawling, living off prostitutes and petty crime, they've created a toxic atmosphere that's resulted in a standoff, with the three of them against Michael and his wife.

The stage is set for a violent end to the saga, and it comes when their father, DaDa arrives with the youngest brother Des, who also plans to settle in England.

A feud with another expatriate family, the Mulryans, serves as the catalyst for a bloodbath that will force the brothers and their father to look inside themselves, but not until a self-inflicted tragedy has destroyed their bond forever.

Murphy's script is at its best in tearing away at the festering scabs of fraternal resentment and showing how deeply people can hurt each other in the name of love.

But it betrays its age in embracing some of the more basic elements of naturalistic drama: offstage action, revelatory speeches, blatant exposition. You have to be Ibsen or O'Neill to get away with a lot of those devices and Murphy isn't quite in their league.

Still, he knows how to deliver dramatic punches that can lift an audience out of their seats and if you're seeking a play with blood pounding through its veins, you'll find it here.

Praise is due to director Jason Byrne, of Ireland's Loose Canon Theatre Company. He sets the action in a simple, claustrophobic playing area by John Thompson that offers the actors (and the audience) no chance for escape.

It's perfect no-frills staging, concentrating on what is truly important: the actors and the script.

Together, with master fight director John Stead, he also leads us through some incredibly convincing on-stage violence, which makes the second act of this play particularly devastating.

The acting company could not be bettered, working together with a subtlety and seamlessness that usually only emerges from an ensemble that has been together for years.

Jonathan Goad underplays the odd-man-out Michael with a breathtaking display of control. He almost speaks under his breath at times, a man who's afraid to take a stand, but yet we hear everything he says and understand his agony, thanks to the heartbreak pouring out of his eyes.

Allan Hawco is also brilliant at the other end of the spectrum as Harry, the bully of the bunch, the emotional terrorist. Hawco has never given a tougher, grittier performance and it's instantly obvious that the dark side sits well on him.

The character of DaDa is a great, shambling old, lion, which Joe Ziegler brings to life with painful precision. He's an Irish Willy Loman with a strong streak of violence and Ziegler taps into that delusional world without sentimentality.

The youngest brother, Des, could have been played as a clichéd juvenile, but Philip Riccio takes a bolder tack, making him tense and spiky, with a hint of psychosis.

Sarah Dodd plays Betty with a combination of toughness and vulnerability that she brings off admirably and David Jansen makes the small role of good buddy Mush memorable, thanks to his vivid personality.

Oliver Becker and Aaron Poole do all that can be done with the two other Carney brothers, but author Murphy hasn't given them much to work with -- one of the script's failings.

A Whistle in the Dark marks the first production of a new group, The Company Theatre. Its choice of a worthy play, a first-class director and an excellent cast show it knows what it takes to make good drama.

Now it's your chance to become part of the audience and complete the other end of the dramatic equation.