

A piercing Whistle

★★★★ (out of five)

Not much more than a dozen seconds into *A Whistle In The Dark*, the Company Theatre production of Tom Murphy's play, a cup gets smashed to bits against a wall in anger.

It comes out of the blue, there's no buildup. And yet it rudely shocks the audience and keeps it on edge for two hours of barely-suppressed violence, anger and frustration, fueled by smoking and drinking and broken sporadically with dry wit.

It's an abrupt but entirely appropriate introduction to the Carneys, a lowlife clan from County Mayo, Ireland, carving a lowlife's existence in London -- save for pacifist (and passive) educated brother Michael (Jonathan Goad), who's gamely treading the straight and narrow with his bank job and English wife Betty (Sarah Dodd).

Inexplicably, Michael's modest home doubles as a flop-house for his drunken troglodyte siblings, whose motto is "a man who can't fight is no man at all," and who are making their own sort of stab at carving a life amongst the "Shams" (their inferiority-driven term for the English who look down on them).

The demonically malevolent Harry (Allan Hawco) is a pimp. Hulking, stuttering brother Iggy (Oliver Becker) is a corrupt builder. Hugo (Aaron Poole) is a wastrel along for the ride, as is Harry's toadying best friend Mush (David Jansen).

Why anybody's wife would put up with "guests" like these is a mystery, but Sally does -- cleaning up messes, making tea and enduring the most vicious verbal attacks from Harry, and generally behaving as if dutifulness eventually makes things right.

By Jim Slotek

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That Michael lacks the spine for a true break from his heritage is clear enough from his inability to stand up for his wife, but it comes into uncomfortable focus with the appearance of the Carney patriarch DaDa (Joseph Ziegler), a tough-talking blowhard and fraud whose pretensions of intelligence provide the play with its moments of levity. Besides aiding his other sons in bullying Michael both emotionally and physically, and badly influencing his promising youngest son Des (Philip Riccio), DaDa goads the sons into consummating a blood-oath feud with another family of louts, the Mulryans.

What's intriguing is how this 40-year-old play, presented in Canada for the first time, is relevant as a modern-day metaphor. The Carneys are any family of emigres or fringe segment of an ethnic community carrying sad, violent baggage with them. And Michael's attempt to break the cycle of violence is as laudable as that of anyone from, say, a terrorist hotbed trying to do the same when the opportunity of a fresh start presents itself.

A Whistle In The Dark is presented sparsely and intimately, and carried by a solidly professional cast, all of whom maintain their accents without once evoking Lucky Charms cereal. Much of the play's voltage is provided by Hawco, whose Harry is terrifying as he simmers with repressed rage, constantly one spark away from exploding. His prey, Michael, is painted in deft strokes by Goad as admirable and charming in intent, and pitiable in his ineffectuality.

It's not a feel-good night out, but it's a solid piece of theatre with a depth of insight into the human condition.