

The Darkness of Sight

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Molly Sweeney

by **Brian Friel**

Directed by **Christopher Haines**

iTheatre Collaborative

Herberger Theater Center's Performance Outreach Theatre, Phoenix

(602) 347-1071

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\$12.00 - \$15.00

At 1:58 on a Sunday, I sat in an audience set up for around one hundred. I was alone; no other reservations, no walk-ups. I chatted with **iTheatre Collaborative's** Artistic Director **Christopher Haines**, helmer of their current production of **Brian Friel's** talky and philosophical three-person play ***Molly Sweeney***. This wasn't the first time I'd been in a situation where I was outnumbered by the cast. I gave Haines and his cast an out: I insisted they decide whether or not they wanted to perform their show. In my heart, I have always felt that the words "the show must go on" is an imperative more than an ideal, but after several seasons, I've decided to no longer press the issue. Two minutes later, with the theatre's four ushers scattered in seats around me, **Molly Lajoie**, **Roy Major**, and **Radford Mallon** took the stage. There was never a question in their minds. Their courage was my good fortune: while hundreds will drop much too much money for mediocre material in the bigger theatre's, no one was willing this Sunday afternoon to spend a lot less for a lot more. iTC's offering is a subtly acted and directed piece that

proves once again that deeper, harder-hitting and provocative theatre is readily available and regrettably unnoticed.

This is theatre of the mind. There are three chairs and a covered object that is not revealed until the very end. The men do not move from their chairs. Molly (Lajoie), obviously blind, moves occasionally. She, her husband Frank (Mallon) and her Doctor Rice (Major) take turns going through the events surrounding the operation to return sight to Molly forty years after losing it. Frank is a finder of causes, and Molly is his latest. Doctor Rice is in need of a cure for his own personal ills, and Molly can return him to glory. Molly is a victim of others expectations, and her ironic punishment is the ability to see.

When movement is nearly impossible, the job of the director is to make us concentrate upon the words and gestures that define the relationships. Haines clues us in with such subtleties as how one leans in the chair or stumbles over a phrase. He ensures that his actors' accents reflect their characters' station and upbringing. Their Irish is not the uniform brogue Americans associate with the land of Eire, but instead the slightly different communication styles in the old country that brand and damns them. It is this type of attention to detail that allows us to move past the lack of action and to appreciate the cerebral offerings.

Lajoie is a model of show-not-tell. She uses the words to shade, not to carry her. We learn just as much from the way that she moves assuredly around her chair and the jaunty angle of her head upon her slender neck as we do from the rise and fall of her situation. Mallon is the living embodiment of the well-meaning scourge. He uses the overuse of flattery and the self-reflection of pejoratives to make us love, then hate, then pity Frank. Not quite as strong as the other two, but still effective is

Major, who flits around his characters alcoholism and gives us hints of the self-destructive nature of a doctor on a mission. Sometimes Major stumbles over his large load of lines a bit too realistically and seems too disconnected from the surroundings, even moreso than his character requires, but when he does connect with the other two, the moments shine. It is a testament to the trio that they were able to bring so much power and emotional truth when playing only to a critic and a few ushers. It's also a travesty that they needed to do so in the first place.

The evening shows prior had been well attended (in the lowered expectations of this cerebral theatre, groups of between 20 and 40 are considered nice crowds), and hopefully word of mouth will bring more to appreciate what can be done with only a few lights, draperies, and a director and performers with the utmost commitment to the strong words of a playwright and their craft. Some critics may insist that they don't want to have to suspend belief when they go to the theatre, but I believe that some of the most compelling creations take flight not when fried eggs are really eaten onstage, but when emotional truth is achieved. iTheatre Collaborative gets this, and for that their productions should be cheered. And attended.