

## Final stage in O'Brien trilogy

By EMER O'KELLY

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PERHAPS the greatest affirmation of the thrust and authenticity of Flann O'Brien's *The Poor Mouth* is that not too many people had read it before 1964, although it was originally published in 1941.

The reason? Original publication was in Irish as *An Beal Bocht*. Game, set, and match, not merely to Patrick Power, who translated and re-published it a few years before O'Brien's death, giving it not so much a new life as a life: but also to the author's nasty, vicious, lugubriously accurate reading of the "purity" of Irish language nationalism.

It is, to this reader at least, the funniest of his novels. Actually, it's the only one I find even remotely funny, so my critical expectations of his work when translated to the stage are fairly low. This year marks the centenary of Brian O'Nolan's (the author's real name) birth, and there is a flurry of celebratory material around the place, as is to be expected and applauded.

The problem is that so many of the admirers of the work celebrate it as having a major place on the world literary stage. Not so. O'Nolan/ naGopaleen/O'Brien is an intrinsically Irish writer -- so much so that his work leaves international readers/critics who come across it puzzled as to its density, and unconvinced of its universality.

And for Irish people, well aware of what he's getting at, there's another problem with *The Poor Mouth*. It's difficult to satirise something that to any sane person is already a satire. And that is the Irish fanatical devotion to victimhood, and the inbred delusion that the Irish language is first of all a living one, and second, a world language, with its writers vastly superior to any combination of pygmies such as Dante, Shakespeare, Racine and/or James Joyce.

Jocelyn Clarke has adapted *The Poor Mouth* for *Blue Raincoat* in Sligo, completing his trilogy of Flann/Myles work. And under artistic director Niall Henry's direction it works very well, if a trifle slowly, with Sandra O'Malley playing the central character of Bonaparte O'Coonassa, born seemingly fatherless in the Gaeltacht townland of Corkadoragha, where the purity of language and the purity of poverty walk hand in hand as an attainable Holy Grail. The locals are encouraged by outsiders, well bred and well fed and mostly from Dublin, who encourage the purity before returning to their own impurely comfortable lives.

Bonaparte suffers everything that is admirable: an ignorant minimal schooling, life in a house where the family shares the kitchen/bedroom with the animals, a joyless

marriage before his wife and infant child die in a blink, leaving him to end up with a 29-year jail sentence for a murder he didn't commit while in search of hidden fairy gold. And we meet him writing his memoirs, consumed with guilt at the comfort of prison life, a betrayal of all that Gaeilgeoiri hold dear.

Ciaran McCauley plays Grandfather (the Old Grey Fellow) and the Blue Raincoat ensemble of Kellie Hughes, John Carty and Bob Kelly complete the cast in the various roles along Bonaparte's road to Calvary/Damascus.

Jamie Vartan's design works extremely well, and Barry McKinney's lighting is also excellent. Joe Hunt's sound and music are extraordinarily effective.

- *EMER O'KELLY*

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