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Reviewed by [Treasa De Loughry \(http://exeuntmagazine.com/author/treasa-de-loughry/\)](http://exeuntmagazine.com/author/treasa-de-loughry/)

★★★★☆

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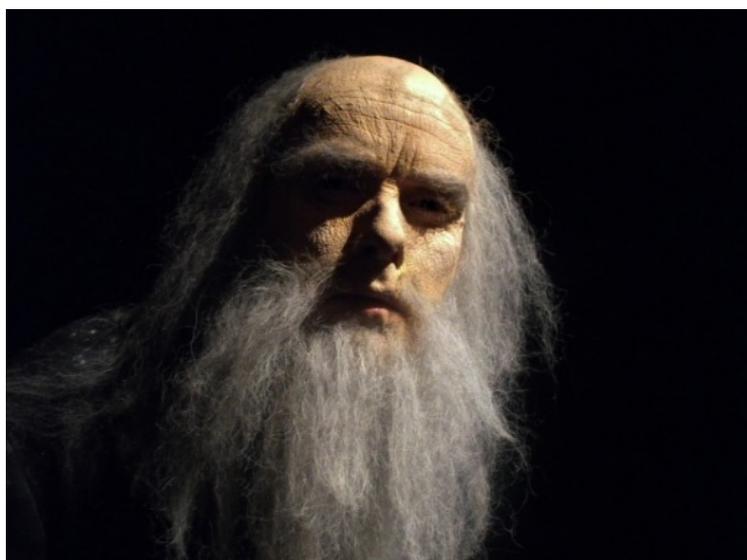
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The ould grey fella. Photo: Joe Hunt

Produced by

Blue Raincoat Theatre Company

Directed by

Niall Henry

Written by

Jocelyn Clarke, based on the book by Flann O'Brien

Cast Includes

Ruth Lehane, John Carty, Nicola McEvilly, Jean-Marie Perinetti, Ciarán McCauley

Funny, outrageous, farcical, and in the end tragic, Blue Raincoat's adaptation of Flann O'Brien's satirical masterpiece, *The Poor Mouth*, restores the hilarity of the original novel while revealing some uncomfortable truths about the stubborn pervasiveness of Ireland's grinding poverty and ignorance.

This is the final adaptation by Jocelyn Clarke of Flann O'Brien's trilogy of *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*, and it shows: the prose is carefully chosen, lively, vibrant and laugh out loud funny. The awful miseries of the Gaels in Corkadorgha, a windswept village in a remote glen in the West of Ireland are parodied and mocked as no one is spared in Clarke's adaptation.



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The west of

Ireland where Bonaparte O'Coonassa and his family live is a grim antidote to the typically romantic portrayals of the west coast: a bleak, stark, miserable, wet and hungry place to eke out an existence, where the sun is a strange 'yellow

lamp', and the young people 'emigrate to Siberia' in the hopes of better weather. This tale of the 'Gaels', a race whose 'like will never be seen ever again', thoroughly debunks the starry eyed romanticism of the Irish revival's 'Celtic Twilight', and resonates nicely against the Irish government's campaign for a national 'Gathering' next year.

Bonaparte is the picaresque product of O'Brien's rural Ireland, a lazy lowlife who doesn't bother with school, ambition or even gluttony – his horizons are as small as the cottage he shares with his mother, the 'Old Grey Fellow' and their pigs. But the difficulties of adapting O'Brien's novel are apparent as Ruth Lehane's Bonaparte O'Coonassa constantly loiters at the edge of the stage, softly intoning Bonaparte's narrative throughout and occasionally stuttering as the hour and a half monologue begins to take its toll. Meanwhile, McEville's powerfully rendered mother, all hard jawbone, short temper, and perpetual grimace is mostly to be found scrubbing the cottage floor, marking the cyclical passage of time in the poor, rural hinterland.

It is up to the conniving mischief of Ciarán McCauley's Ould Grey Fellow and John Carty's excellent comic timing as a Gaeligore (Irish language speaker), and midnight carousing pig, to jolt the audience into laughter. Carty's swirling, drunken pig is a surreal but perfectly captured example of O'Brien's vivid comedy as he swills spirits and fools Perinetti's intellectual Dublin researcher into believing that his streams of guttural curses and honks are the most poetic form of Irish ever heard. Teams of researchers gather to decode the recordings of the 'natives', drawing an uncomfortable attention to the voyeurism of Ireland's intellectual class and their facetious Gaelic aspirations.

The set, Jamie Vartan's simple Ireland-like misshapen island, with its small mountain ranges and sparse cottages huddling in each of the far corners, brilliantly suggests this axis of O'Brien's critique, as the play moves from a damning indictment of the poverty of the west to the aspirations of affluent city dwellers in constructing a twee national myth. The Gaeligore's festival scene in the middle of the play acts as a comedic and critical lynchpin as the intellectuals bless themselves with honorary Gaelic titles ranging from 'The Gaelic Daisy', to 'The Little Brown Hen', and 'The Humble Bishop', while the peasants of Corkadoragha are content with their non-Irish Bonapartes and Michaelangos.

This naming suggests that there is an amnesia attendant on the poverty of years of colonial and post-colonial misrule which doesn't allow for the luxury of exotic Gaelic names. The 'poor mouth' of the title is an Irish proverb, 'an béal bocht', given to those who exaggeratedly perform their poverty, and the intense tragedy of Ireland's inherited material and cultural poverty suggested by O'Brien isn't nearly drawn out enough in Clarke's adaptation. The play's abrupt turn from farce to tragedy in the last third of the play was too rushed, couched as it was against the comedy of the earlier scenes.

But this is a small flaw in a remarkable adaptation which restores O'Brien's place as Ireland's satirical antidote to the naïve and conservative revivalism of mid-twentieth century Ireland.



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