

REVIEWS | TRAVERSE

Review – The Poor Mouth

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***** **Rich Lip**

Traverse Theatre
Thurs 30 May – Sat 1 June
Review by Irene Brown

Magnificent theatricality marks out this clever touring adaptation of Flann O'Brien's great satire from Irish company Blue Raincoat, which is at the Traverse and touring to the Tron in Glasgow.

The sloped stage has become a map of Ireland, its wooden planks like half-ploughed green and brown fields, dotted along the edge with wee white cottages. Over this fine set, by Jamie Vartan, the cast move with pedestrian grace to tell the tragicomic tale of Bonaparte O'Cloonassa of Corkadoragha.

O'Brien's satire on the Irish, their language and their culture was originally published in Irish Gaelic in 1941 under the name *Myles na gCopaleen*, and is regarded as one of the greatest Irish-language novels of the 20th century. The novel's lampooning of academics using Gaelic, which to them would be like using a foreign language, and the comic take on the impact of power on a minority language is as true now as it ever was.

The title *The Poor Mouth*, comes from the Irish (and Scottish) term 'to put on the poor mouth', meaning to exaggerate one's circumstances for sympathy. The phrase has a double edge: it references the general poverty of the time when mouths were empty and is also a comment on the low status of the minority language of the poor. This was when children were routinely beaten at school for using their mother tongue – in the play they assume the universal name of Jams O'Donnell to great comic effect.

Free from the miseries of life

The fantastically named Bonaparte O'Cloonassa is played with cool panache by Sandra O'Malley. Through direct narration, O'Malley takes the character from birth in the backside (or arse) of a house, where much action takes place. She carries through his childhood, in the ashes of his home shared with the beasts, to his short-lived marriage and experience of parenthood – ending with his being sent to prison on a false murder charge where he will be "safe ... and free from the miseries of life".

Blue Raincoat subvert and abandon gender roles with impunity. Nichola McEvilly and Ruth Lehane taking on a variety within the piece to great and graceful comic effect. Equally John Carty, with a brilliant startled wide-eyed mask that seems both mobile and static, shifts through an array of characters. Ciaran McCauley is aged perfection as the Old Grey Fellow who stiff-joints his way through the piece. Their postures and gestures all testament to their mime training at *École de Mime Corporel Dramatique* in London as they shuffle or strut in huddles of brilliance.

The sympathetic lighting from Barry McKinney compliments Joe Hunt's atmospheric sounds, including plaintive cello notes that chime beautifully with the performance. Add precise direction and gorgeous choreography from Niall Henry and this production is nothing short of magnificent theatricality. Minimal costumes – a false nose for a pig or a change of hat here and there – are sufficient for the abilities the cast brings.

The Poor Mouth is the final part in a trilogy of stage adaptations by Jocelyn Clarke of the major novels of Flann O'Brien for Blue Raincoat. The series began in 2007 with *The Third Policeman* and was followed in 2009 by *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Their like may never be seen again.

Running time 1 hr 30 mins

Run ends Saturday 1 June 2013

Tickets from: www.traverse.co.uk*The Traverse, 10 Cambridge Street EH1 2ED. Thurs-Sat, 7.30pm – with post-show discussion on Friday.*The Poor Mouth tours to Glasgow's **Tron Theatre**: Wednesday 5 – Saturday 8 June 2013Tickets from: www.tron.co.uk*The Tron 63 Trongate, Glasgow, G1 5HB. Wed-Sat, 7.45pm. Box Office: 0141 552 4267*

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The Poor Mouth. Photo credit: Blue Raincoat Ensemble