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Photos

Written by Malcolm Hamilton

Directed by Niall Henry

**THE STRANGE
VOYAGE OF
DONALD
CROWHURST**

Media Release

The Strange Voyage of Donald Crowhurst by Blue Raincoat Theatre Company

Based on a true story, the play follows the journey of 36-year old Donald Crowhurst, who set out from England in 1968 in an improbable-looking plywood trimaran to participate in the first single-handed, non-stop, round-the-world sailboat race. Although his previous sailing experience was limited and his boat unready, Crowhurst had managed to persuade an affluent backer, the contest judges and England's media to regard him as a serious contender.

Sailing south through the Atlantic, he rewarded their belief in him with reports of record-breaking sailing performances. In the South Atlantic, Crowhurst announced that low battery power would require him to maintain radio silence through the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Eleven weeks later he broke his silence to tell the world he had rounded Cape Horn and was sailing north for England, the elapsed-time leader of the race. Then tragedy struck.

Eight months after Crowhurst's departure, his vessel, the Teignmouth Electron was discovered adrift in an eerie mid-Atlantic calm, intact but without her skipper. Intriguingly there were two logbooks, one with the fictional version of events that Crowhurst had offered to the media, the other providing the true account. The subsequent investigations into what happened have given us one of the most

remarkable stories of human aspiration and human failing, bravery and foolhardiness, delivering the sea drama of the century.

In *The Strange Voyage of Donald Crowhurst*, Blue Raincoat Theatre Company explores the dual presentation of reality from the imagined viewpoints of Crowhurst and his wife, Clare, anxiously waiting at home and caring for their four children, marking his imaginary progress on a world map through the months of radio silence. Donald's and Clare's journeys, from hope to desperation, and finally into uniquely personal salvations, are traced and reflected back to the audience.

'The Strange Voyage of Donald Crowhurst ... will transport you into another world – a beautiful, disturbing world of murky light, lapping waves, madness, and insanely graceful movement ... its feverish beauty haunted me for days.'

Irish Theatre Magazine

'The play is a visual and sensory treat ... Blue Raincoat continues to be one of the most interesting and engaging theatrical companies working in Ireland today.'

The Sunday Tribune

Media Review

On tour; reviewed 27 March 2003 at the Town Hall Theatre, Galway
BY CATRIONA MITCHELL for IRISH THEATRE MAGAZINE
The Strange Voyage of Donald Crowhurst by Blue Raincoat Theatre Company

Be warned: The Strange Voyage of Donald Crowhurst is strange. But in a wonderful way. It's a series of kinetic tableaux that will transport you into another world - a beautiful, disturbing world of murky light, lapping waves, madness, and insanely graceful movement.

Don't bother looking for a plot: there isn't one, although the show has its origins in a true story. Donald Crowhurst, a British sailor who set off on a solitary race around the world in 1968, in fact hid somewhere off the coast of Argentina, never leaving the Atlantic. His boat was found eight months later, intact without its skipper, containing two log-books: one was the fictional version Crowhurst had fed to the press about his travels; the other gave the true account.

It was Crowhurst's dual presentation of reality that drew director Niall Henry to the tale. "It's about the idea of perceived realities, and what we view as truth", Henry said in a recent interview. This idea is explored less through Crowhurst than through his wife, Clare. Five performers (John Carty, Ciaran McCauley, Fiona McGeown, Sandra O'Malley and Barbara Ryan) play just two characters, on a darkened stage that is bare but for Crowhurst's boat. For the most part we see two Donalds, in weatherproof gear, and three Clares, in polka-dotted dresses - though at one magi-

five Donalds appear, when the women don men's hats and coats, turn their backs to the audience, and all become indistinguishable one from the other. Our confusion - which Clare can we trust? Which Donald is the real one? – is a reflection of the consternation Clare faced upon the disappearance. She was confronted with the fact that she didn't really know her husband at all.

The writing, by Malcolm Hamilton, is fragmented and abstract; its rhythm rises and falls like the ocean. Clare speaks manically to herself, in an attempt to stay sane: “stare vacantly at floor... no reported sighting of husband on radio news... find four school bags... remember to place bread in oven... ring post office for the twelfth time this week... keep going Clare...” Donald also speaks to himself, with a faultless delivery of tongue-twisting lines. He is clearly delusional from the start. “Look two hands ... obey me, they do, they must be mine...” His crazed outbursts are not without humour: “Has anyone seen an equator lying around here?”

The Clares lift laundry in and out of baskets, glide through the portholes of Donald's boat, and hang up washing at three in the morning, while the Donalds pace the stage, or scribble with agitated, exaggerated motion at a desk. All five performers are expert at articulating through the body, or “sculpting the body in a poetic way,” as John Carty describes it in interview. Despite their feverishness, the actors are as fluid as the sea. Sandra O'Malley is particularly breathtaking as she spins across the stage with a desk and chair.

The boat, wheeled from stage right to center-stage during the performance, is crafted in a dark timber, smudged with ochre and rust – in itself a work of art. But every detail in the show is aesthetically pleasing, like a sepia photograph, or a painting that’s accrued the patina of old age. The lighting by Barry McKinney is designed to give the effects of chiaroscuro, as in the paintings of Georges de la Tour. Spotlights demarcate what we should be looking at - the curve of a neck or the slant of a shoulder - while the rest of the stage is plunged in darkness. According to Niall Henry the intention, visually, was to create the way light and dark appears underwater - hence the sepia palette, which is broken only once, when one of the Clares sprinkles lurid pink and blue confetti from the boat. It swirls like shoals of phosphorescent tropical fish.

The sound design by Joe Hunt brings us deeper into the dark, turbulent universe. We hear wind and crashing waves, and at one stunning moment, water-drips are set in rhythm like a drum beat. But the highlight is the loud, clashing, carnival-style music – a style Carty refers to as “burlesque grotesque”. BBC film footage and radio excerpts are used intermittently, and at the very end, in a voice-over, providing immensely satisfying closure, the real Crowhurst declares that traveling for a long time in a small boat is not unlike the journey from birth to the grave.

The Strange Voyage of Donald Crowhurst is challenging to its audience – it may even be accused of being inaccessible. But it showed this audience member a new way of seeing, and its feverish beauty haunted me for days.

Catriona Mitchell is currently studying for an MA in Writing at NUI, Galway.



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