

Queen of Technicolor: The Story of Maureen O'Hara, review by Conor McGinnity

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It's been a long time since any sort of mass attended live event, be it theatre or music was performed in An Táin Arts Centre, or anywhere else around the country.

It was a rare treat to witness Queen of Technicolor: The Story of Maureen O'Hara in the main stage, and a great return to some semblance of normality. Of course, the audience was socially distanced, masks were worn throughout and even the show itself was performed by only one person, which did not dim the experience at all. The whole thing goes to show that live performance is still possible, and indeed essential for our sanity, in this day and age.

The show has been created and toured by the wonderful Elaine O'Dwyer and directed by the very talented Gráinne Byrne. O'Hara was born one hundred years ago this year in Dublin, so this centennial celebration is suitably apt.

We open on an opulent, although untidy dressing room, and O'Hara herself puts order to both her career and the room itself as the play unfolds. The whole story of the play, and her life, is one of resilience and struggle. This was a woman steelishly navigating an even more abusive and male dominated Hollywood than the one we now know, long before ideas like feminism were even a thing.

O'Hara dealt with disastrous marriages, violent directors and colleagues with an Irish wit and a world-facing serenity. It's almost funny to learn that John Farrow, grandfather of Weinstein-killer Ronan, tried to sexually assault Maureen early in her career. The play itself leaves you with a feeling of sympathy for O'Hara, and all women that were openly celebrated but preyed upon behind closed doors, and a deep frustration and anger towards the men that created such an environment and took such cruel advantage.

O'Dwyer is a truly powerful performer; slipping seamlessly from the international superstar holding court with a team of reporters, to a woman on a knife's edge, holding together a terrible marriage, while raising a child and servicing a demanding contract and career by sheer force of will.

Tragedy after tragedy befell Maureen O'Hara throughout her life but that did not define her, she did not allow it to. She was always craving the meatier, more anarchic roles and often felt that because she looked so good in technicolor, hence the title, she was almost pigeonholed. The play was so well researched, the huge volume of information we learned about her life so deftly woven into the script that we did not even notice.

Conor McGinnity is An Táin Arts Centre's writer in residence. Conor will be in residence during July, August and September 2020. Follow his progress on @antainarts #antainartists

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The cues when Elaine took on different roles were spot on; timed to absolute perfection. Maureen would be giving us the skinny on a certain role, within a breath the lights would change and her performance with them, as we met a new character. Amazing craft on display here.

Queen of Technicolor, The Story of Maureen O'Hara is a fine piece of theatre. It is important too, with lessons from the past that still echo loudly today. The treatment of women, the belief that celebrities do not suffer as we mortals do, are both probed and examined throughout.

I was very glad that a return to the theatre afforded me this experience. It was a thoroughly enjoyable and enlightening evening and one that has awoken a new found admiration and respect for one of Ireland's, and the world's, most iconic stars. Elaine O'Dwyer has done a fabulous job and created an excellent work.

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