

Reviews

Theatre Review

HAPPY DAYS

Barbican Centre

"MY OWN father sits in the chair and communicates through grunts. My mother witters on to fill up the silences," was a remark overheard at the interval of The Gate's performance of Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days* at the Barbican Theatre.

It was proof that Beckett's surreal play, in which a woman is stuck in a hole in the ground, gossiping to herself to relieve boredom, while her husband sits in his own hole nearby hardly ever speaking, is grounded in reality.

As a near monologue the play is reliant on a strong performance as the garrulous Winnie and Rosaleen. Linehan was remarkable, worrying about the best moment for her daily song, or taking crumbs of comfort from remembering snatches of "the classics".

The danger with Beckett is to overemphasise the pathos

at the expense of comedy, but Ms Linehan's comic timing and the variety of her tones of voice and gesture made her performance a treat.

She was all Irish verbosity running away with itself, at times tearful and then lyrical. Most tellingly, she was bitingly satirical with husband Willie.

Winnie: "Willie, what would you say speaking of the hair on your head, them or it?"

Willie: "It".

Winnie: "Oh, you are going to talk to me today, this is going to be a happy day."

The resilience of Linehan's Winnie to my mind made her performance superior to that of John Hurt in Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* earlier in the week.

He was acclaimed as the banana-devouring old man playing tapes of himself as a younger man but I felt he was too morose.

Krapp, as interpreted by Hurt, was so broken that he hardly raised the energy to inject the lines with the flourish needed to raise a laugh, whereas Linehan's sarcasm directed at her

husband brought forth loud laughter.

When Willie crawled from his hole raising his hand yearningly towards Winnie, she witheringly said: "Well, this is an unexpected pleasure". Her flamboyant delivery, slightly pompous, was like a character from Oscar Wilde.

Then, mocking his silence, she said: "Oh I know you were never one to talk, I worship you Winnie be mine and then nothing from that day forth." The line was cuttingly and wittily delivered.

Barry McGovern had a splendidly shabby-genteel appearance as Willie proudly plucking his walrus moustache. But his world is sordid. Unable to reach out to Winnie he has only pornographic pictures for company.

Director Karel Reisz, who made the films *Saturday Night Sunday Morning* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, created an easy-on-the-eye set design with bright Mediterranean lighting, a jagged rockface shaped like a chunk of Ireland's west coast, and a soft blue background. ■ The next major Beckett play in The Barbican's complete staging of the Irishman's work is *Endgame* from September 15 to 18. Ring 0171 638 8891.

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