



Iris produced by Manana Productions
Reviewed by **Paul Thompson** October 2014

Three Minute Theatre is the venue equivalent of the Stone Roses playing Fools Gold on Top Of The Pops in 1989 (ask your dad... or Youtube). Funky, stylish and unashamedly indie – the comparison only falls down due to the effortlessly friendly demeanour shooting from all directions. How many times did you go to the toilet at a theatre only to have your plans briefly scuppered by an apologetic member of the cast applying make up? To paraphrase Dorothy: “We’re not at the Royal Exchange any more.” And we’re roughly twenty times happier for it.

Tonight spotlights the imposing talent and colossal potential of **Rebecca-Clare Evans** who writes, stars in, and – my email tells me, but this detail is missing from the poster – co-directs Iris, a tale of woe, inaction and betrayal. The eponymous

Iris

(

Rebecca-Clare Evans

) starts out as a character we can all relate to: cheerfully unfulfilled, feisty and resisting the correctly observed suggestion that she wants to find that special someone. Best mate

Sarah

(

Francesca Kingdom

) sets her up with her other half's pal

Ben

(

Mark Smalley

). But, after a relentlessly promising honeymoon period, things go pear-shaped as Ben – rather suddenly – reveals himself as a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Rather than a ripping yarn, *Iris* is an issue-driven, in-your-face study of domestic abuse and the pussy-footing that surrounds it. It certainly has a lot to recommend it. Along with a sterling support cast, **Evans** conjures up a performance so harrowing and real, you momentarily forget you're in an auditorium with a bottle of Hobgoblin in your hand.

Before I noticed in the programme that director **Natalie Kennedy** largely brings experience in film to the table, I was going to say that the realisation was refreshingly cinematic. So is the dialogue, and the spectacle is much richer for it. No character spits out unlikely, convoluted speeches sounding like a writer in love with his or her own words – the talking is clipped, convincing and easy to digest. No monologues (Halleluja, we see too much monologue in theatre – playwrights use it because they can). From time to time, a line is little too on the nose:

Dopey landlord

Phil (Gary

Overton

)

compares his marriage, in the time-honoured way, to a life sentence. Not even my dad would say something that unoriginal.

But then, one could argue that Phil is supposed to be lame. A few problems with the script are highlighted the moment Iris proclaims (twice) that she “walked into a door”. I'll skip over the fact that this is such a worn-out cliché – let's assume that a victim might still say this – but I can't ignore how the story of the protagonist flat-lined in the second section. Our main character has become so weak and ineffective, she can't even come up with a decent excuse. And the mistake, for my money, is not that this has happened to Iris; the mistake was making Iris the “hero” in the first place. Because, upsetting as her fate is, Iris is not suitable as a hero. It would have been better, I start to realise, if Iris's story was told through a different set of eyes. Possibly without realising it, **Evans** has already created the perfect hero in Sarah. She's likeable. She's flawed (A bit too flawed for a hero as it stands, but it wouldn't take much to engineer better reasons for her to go fleetingly to the dark side).

All the drama (as opposed to the suffering; I'm with the inimitable Robert McKee on that distinction) is at her feet: she commits an horrendous subterfuge that raises the stakes (the stuff midpoints are made of, and that did come at just right time). The real climax, for me, was not the ending: it was Sarah's double sacrifice – letting go of her marriage and best friendship to do what's right. A shame it was of no consequence: it would have been inspiring for the story and the characters to show us: “You don't have to live like this.” Rather than just a taped, tacked-on voice at the end – telling us.

Unfortunately, I think **Evans** became too focused on relating the narrative from Iris's viewpoint. So we see too much of the initial honeymoon period. The abuse peaks quickly – which is okay for a backdrop to drama, but when that's used as the dramatic focal point itself, it's left with nowhere to go. Consequently, we're shown the same abuse over and again. And again. And again. I appreciate the efforts to break the tension with attempts at daftness, but the audience found them hard to adapt to and absorb because Iris's nightmare is brought to life in such graphic, punishing and never-ending detail. With Sarah in the driving seat, we would have found respite in seeing some of the other interesting but under-developed strands coming together:

Anne

(

Karen Allen

) as mentor;

Craig

(

Dru Jones

) as Sarah's ally and potential solution / happy ending.

Tod

(

Kash Arshad

) as a force of antagonism who helps us to understand Sarah's imperfections.

This is a chilling and competent work that brings home the tyranny of physical bullying – and, for the paying punter, it's seven quid well spent. But for the mooted movie adaptation – which I look forward to – the challenge should be more than the chore of being voyeurs to abject misery. The *drama* needs to be more challenging. If Ben were more devious throughout – if he were less square-shouldered hostile and scowling in public... more sweetness and light, stringing everybody along apart from our hero who very slowly susses him out – we would get to see more of the shades of grey that trap women in these predicaments. If we, as an audience, were drawn in by his charms more – if he played off Craig's aggression with passive aggression, for instance... playing the victim with panache – we may just feel at times guilty that we don't hate him as much as we should. And that's more demanding than being asked to despise a pure monster.

But none of this must distract from the news that Evans, a Performing Arts graduate of a few years, looks set to go far. This currently gets three out of five stars – and there isn't much more digging to persevere with before a gem is uncovered. And when she does, she will knock your socks off.