



REVIEW

The Gigli Concert Druid Lane Theatre, Galway

Peter Crawley

"Christ, how am I going to get through today?" asks Peter Sullivan's crumpled, bedraggled JPW King in an office so shabby and incomplete that it, too, seems to have lost the will to go on.

The line comes with a soft weariness beginning Tom Murphy's 1983 play not with a sigh, but a prayer. In Druid's beautifully intimate and wonderfully performed revival of *The Gigli Concert* – which ought to be seen in its impressively refurbished, satisfyingly tiny theatre – everyone is in search of salvation.

King, an Englishman unsettled in Dublin and a licensed "dynamatologist", is supposed to have the answers, but makes for a deeply unlikely saviour. Yet here is Dennis Conway, playing a guarded, nameless Irish builder, now living in a fug of empty prosperity, depression and delusion (the zeitgeist disorder, in other words) who is intent on singing like forgotten opera star Beniamino Gigli. Their sessions, shot through with a dry, self-deprecating comedy at which

Sullivan excels and lubricated with vodka, explode all dynamatologist-patient boundaries. Two damaged souls, each seeking escape from a bleak world, they pursue it either through King's chaotic philosophy and hollow eloquence, or the Irishman's quest for the pure exaltation of song.

Performance is the soul of this challenging play – both its theme and effect depends on theatre's power to convince, to transform, to make something out of nothing – and if that were not a tall enough order, it also serves as a clear religious allegory. An amusingly cheesy visual gag may portray dynamatology founder "Steve" as a salon-fresh Christ figure, but his long absence hints at something more serious: "I do not even know if we are still in existence," says the lost King, like the last remaining prophet of a beaten religion. With the pitifully mortal King expected to heal the sick, perform miracles, suffer and ultimately be transformed, director Garry Hynes stays alive to parallels with a tremendous balance of irony, poetry and profound empathy.

Occasionally, Hynes goes against the subtlety of the text, accompanying King's transformation with impressive but needless stage effects where Francis O'Connor's otherwise beautifully sparing set (itself a

gorgeous avowal of the theatre space) needs no embellishment. Conway, slipping from the glee of a child to the intensity of a psychopath, slaloms nicely between the required registers, but the intimacy of the space works against his more fevered breakdowns. As King's adulterous squeeze, Mona, Eileen Walsh pitches her bruised humanity perfectly, but Mona's interest in this schlub never quite rings true.

All plays are incomplete until performance, but *The Gigli Concert* makes more demands of a production than most. The speeches are constructed as arias, the stage instructions are precise

but inspiring ("he sings the aria to its conclusion and collapses") and its potential is only fully realised if the words can be made flesh. Druid's production achieves this, not just because it is a celebration of theatre, but because it sends up a rallying cry for succour at a time of crisis and dares to imagine spiritual transcendence in a time of buckled beliefs. It is, in short, an extraordinary act of faith.

Runs until July 25th, then Everyman Palace Theatre, Cork, July 28th – Aug 1st, and Town Hall Theatre, Galway, Aug 4th–8th



From left: Denis Conway, Peter Sullivan and Eileen Walsh in *The Gigli Concert* – a tremendous balance of irony, poetry and profound empathy