

Faith Healer: Exploring the power of faith and myth-making

Few can weave a tale that casts a spell of mystery and enlightenment as well as the Irish, and **Brian Friel** was one of the nation's most talented 21st-century examples.



Tony Estrella as Frank. Photo by Cat Laine.

His “Faith Healer” – now on stage for a limited run at The Gamm Theatre – is an honest look at the complexities and frailties of man, the pain and lies woven through relationships, and the power of faith.

Gamm taps Ireland native **Donnla Hughes** to direct and rolls out several of its finest actors for the three-person show to create a soundtrack of chuckles and sighs at the comingled beauty and agony in Friel’s lines.

A series of four monologues over a two-hour production, “Faith Healer” relays a story through each character’s eyes – Frank, the traveling faith healer who promises miracles for the sick and suffering; Grace, his beleaguered wife; and Teddy, his charming Cockney manager.

Friel’s words are captivating. Early into the show, Frank, played by Gamm Artistic Director **Tony Estrella**, refers to the holidays grimly, saying, “The people we moved among were too far along for that kind of celebration.” Those coming to his shows, he says later, “hated me because, by coming, they publicly acknowledged their need...and sealed their anguish.”

Hughes – who filmed a Gamm YouTube video comically assessing Irish accents by Hollywood greats like George Clooney, Julia Roberts, and Tom Hanks – cultivates gentle yet consistent accents in her cast to embody Friel’s tale authentically. Estrella’s brogue is soothing, thickening suitably when lines rise in emotion. The one offered by **Jeanine Kane** as Grace is softer and more neutralized, befitting of the character herself. And **Brandon Whitehead**’s Cockney roll is superb.



Jeanine Kane as Grace. Photo by Cat Laine.

Accents set the scenes but the actors ably add life to the sparse set, moving a chair, draining a beer, or lighting a cigarette as they dissect elements of faith and their relationships. Hughes occasionally uses special lighting and music to frame their delivery and mimic thought sequences. Doing so sparsely, beautifully highlights the moments.

Kane faces perhaps the biggest challenge to capture the audience's heart. While Estrella is enigmatic and Whitehead comical, she must be raw and digs deep for a delivery laced with palpable anguish. In relaying Grace's tragedy, Kane quakes with nerves, repeats the names of towns they've visited as a soothing mantra, and physically contorts under the burden.

There is power in each word of "Faith Healer," brilliance in each actor's delivery, and a lingering sense of sadness long after the curtain falls. The experience is an absolute gift.

"Faith Healer" is playing through January 29 at Gamm, 1245 Jefferson Blvd., Warwick. For ticket information, go to gammtheatre.org.



Brandon Whitehead as Teddy. Photo by Cat Laine.