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Bold Girls at Urban Stages

by Cahir O'Doherty

In 1995 Haley Finn, the Irish-American director of *Bold Girls*, won a scholarship to Ireland to study with the Sean O'Casey Theatre Company in Derry. "It was an exciting time to be there," she says, "the cease-fire had begun and there was suddenly room to have a look at the issues in Northern Ireland in a new way." Fast forward to 2001 and she is approached by theater producers Sasha Eden and Victoria Pettibone to direct "*Bold Girls*", now playing at Urban Stages. A controversial play about the lives of political prisoners' wives in West Belfast in 1991, Finn was primed and ready to begin.

The first thing that strikes you about Sandra Goldmark's set design – a simple working class Irish kitchen – is the larger than life framed photograph of Marie's deceased husband. Shot by the British Army for being a suspected terrorist, Marie knows better. "They shot the wrong man. So they called him the right one."

Absent men haunt almost every scene in the play. But what makes this work unique is that the reality and conse-

quences of the Troubles are seen exclusively through the eyes of the all female cast. These women are not the sainted martyrs of O'Casey's work; they are the raw embodiment of the women of West Belfast. They argue, they roar and they sing together, and each one depends on the other for support and hope in impossible circumstances.

The level of barely concealed fury that underscores their brave talk and laughter is something new and important on an Irish stage. Although the play examines the political background to the Troubles in some detail, the playwright is obviously more interested in the human cost of it on the lives of her characters. Cassie, is openly relieved to be rid of her husband; Nora was regularly beaten before her husband died; only Marie still holds an unshakeable regard for her husband, but eventually she is informed of his many secret affairs. One of these affairs has produced a daughter, who arrives to confront Marie with the reality of her betrayal. Below the sound of the surveillance helicopters

and the distant shots, you can hear the sound of heroes crashing to earth.

"West Belfast has been – of necessity – a very insular community," says Finn, "one of the women describes the city as an open prison at one point. And they turn on each other because of the pressure at times. But I think that the play has a very hopeful message because at the end Marie "adopts" the child produced by her husbands affair."

Bleak as it undoubtedly is, there are other aspects of the play that the director believes point toward positive change. Says Finn, "When the men left – when they were taken away – the women were forced to take control, and to stretch themselves, and their social roles had to change."

Telling stories to get the craic going, to entertain each other and to keep the pain at bay, the women of *Bold Girls* keep returning to the events that have wounded them deeply – perhaps out of habit. And it makes for a cathartic ride. The playwright is insisting, as gently – and as firmly – as she can that once they can see past the lies and the self-deception that they have created for themselves, they have nowhere left to turn but to each other. Recommended.

Bold Girls by Rona Munro at Urban Stages, 259 West 30th Street (7th & 8th Ave) For reservations call: (212)-396-4280. Admission \$15.00.