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Review: 'A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing' Is a Ghostly Play

By Ben Brantley
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The body is barely there, more phantasm than person, and at first you might mistake it for a shadow. When the astonishing Irish actress Aoife Duffin makes her entrance in "A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing," drifting through a corridor of gray light, her features are indistinguishable. And though she soon starts to speak, the words that she says also seem curiously inchoate.

"For you," she says, falteringly, in a voice pitched between a quack and a chirp. "You'll soon. You'll give her name. In the stitches of her skin she'll wear your say."

Come again? Who's "you," anyway?

Keep listening, and keep looking. Little by little, the speaker and her speech assume concrete and coherent form. Suddenly, you're thinking in the language of someone else's mind, that of a rebellious Irish girl scrambling for a sense of her drifting self. And by the end of a timeless 80 minutes, you'll have grasped the dimensions of an entire individual life, in all its confused clarity.

This uncanny act of materialization, which runs through April 30 at the Jerome Robbins Theater of the Baryshnikov Arts Center, is the more



Credit: Emon Hassan

remarkable in that it is also an improbable act of translation, from what would seem to be uncompromisingly literary material. Adapted for the stage by Annie Ryan (also its director), "A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing" is based on the much-lauzeled first novel of Eimear McBride, a book that was rejected repeatedly by publishers and consigned to a desk drawer for a decade before seeing the light of print.

You can understand a publisher's hesitation. That first sentence I quoted, which (like everything else in this play) comes directly from the novel, is typical of what follows, fragmented locutions unadorned by commas or proper names. I began

reading the book in a state of irritation, ready to dismiss it as a wayward, show-off descendant of James Joyce.

Yet Ms. McBride's stream of consciousness appears to flow so naturally from a single organic source that it soon wears down your resistance. And though its text includes many words that would seem unpronounceable by the human tongue, "Girl" turns out to hold the stage quite comfortably, at least with Ms. Duffin and Ms. Ryan as our guides.

O.K., perhaps "comfortably" isn't a word to apply to the telling of a tale as jagged with pain as this one. Its unnamed narrator grows up feisty and

fatherless in rural Ireland, with a fanatically pious mother and a learning-challenged older brother, who nearly died from cancer of the brain as a toddler.

At 13, our heroine is introduced to sex by her uncle, her mother's brother-in-law. She spends the rest of her adolescence in a state of aggressive promiscuity, trying both to numb and to heighten the hurt of that original encounter. She goes to college in Dublin, where she lives large, but is pulled back to the small, insular world of her family, a place she will always be a prisoner.

The stage version, which originated at the Corn Exchange in Dublin, uses only a fraction of the book's original text, though there's never a feeling of abridgment here. Ms. Ryan hasn't made the mistake of opening up the narrative to include externalized characters. The only voice we hear is that of the girl, whose artfully paced ruminations are subliminally echoed by Mel Mercier's music and sound design, and Sinead Wallace's lighting, which seems to hold Ms. Duffin in midair above Lian Bell's abstract country field of a set.

Of course, our narrator takes on the personas of others, but as they are seen and heard by her. "Girl" is no gallery of quick-sketch impersonations. Ms. Duffin gives distinctive identities to the heroine's family members, lovers and fellow travelers through rowdy Dublin nights. But they are also always defined by her character's sense of them, and we see her more clearly through the way she sees them.

Ms. Duffin is so tireless, passionate and exact in her performance, you

only hope she has a reliable means of escaping her onstage alter ego between shows. You never feel her switching onto automatic pilot, coasting on the music of the words, even in such exquisitely cadenced set pieces as the one in which she describes an endless parade of interchangeable lovers, each phrase beginning with the words "I met a man."

Every image has emotional heft and specificity. Speaking of the visiting Christian charismatics who descend upon her family in times of crisis, she says slowly and grimly, "They come with fruitcakes," and you know everything you need to know about these god botherers. When she describes her grandfather's funeral, you feel the whiskey-scented breath of closely gathered multitudes of chattering mourners.

But there is little satirical distance when she evokes those who have been so integral to what she has become: the harried, disapproving mother; the smiling, incestuous uncle, both doting and terrifying; and the damaged brother — the "you" to whom much of her monologue is addressed — the idea of whom she clutches as if it were the only anchor in a raging sea.

Some audience members, especially those who haven't read Ms. McBride's book, may feel at sea themselves. My advice is to go with the flow — or rather the fierce current — of Ms. Duffin's performance. You'll get your bearings sooner than you think.

Toward the show's end, the girl we have to come know with such uneasy intimacy asks: "What's left? What's left behind?" This haunting work

honors the hopelessness implicit in those questions. But, make no mistake, it leaves an indelible mark on the memory.

A Girl is a Half Formed Thing continues through April 30 at Baryshnikov Arts Center in conjunction with Irish Arts Center