PJC REFVIEWS

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The Irish Giant

by Cartoon de Salvo

at the Southwark Playhouse, London: 23 May to 9 June 2012
viewed by PJC and Tony Belton 7 June 2012

It was a cold and stormy night. Raindrops were dripping through the brick vaults underneath the main railway just outside London Bridge station, providing a gothic background music for Cartoon de Salvo's play *The Irish Giant.* The intimate theatre at Southwark Playhouse was less than one-third full. As they waited for the audience to assemble, the three actors wore blood-stained aprons and rueful expressions. Things did not seem very promising.

Yet the performance was a triumph. It was both moving and thought-provoking, as the Cartoon ensemble intended it to be. There were three actors, who sang and acted their way through a historical masque. Unnamed on the programme, they cannot be praised individually. But the Cartoon de Salvo website reports names Brian Logan and Alex Murdoch as artistic devisors for this theatrical collective, and Ed Collier and Lucy Moore as producers. So guessing that two of the three actors appear among these four, they deserve congratulations – shared by one more, Neil Haigh, who was named in another web review.

The story-line explores the dilemmas of 'modern' science and rationalism. One key protagonist is Dr John Hunter (1728-93), the meticulous Scottish surgeon and advocate of close observation in all matters medical. He has rejected the old humoral theories as so much unfounded superstition.

Instead, he urges surgeons to be led by curiosity and a sharp scalpel to dissect the human body, in order to generate an evidence-based science. The audience is addressed throughout as a class of medical students. And our small but attentive class was duly enthused and challenged by this utterly convincing impersonation of John Hunter. With his mop of red hair and an unnervingly manic glare, the actor brings to life the dedication and unconcern for convention that must have marked the historical Hunter as a medical pioneer. At the time I was reminded (favourably) of Christopher Lloyd's engaging performance as the mono-maniacal Doc Brown in the *Back to the Future* film trilogy.

In fact, all the Cartoon de Dalvo cast play a number of parts, both male and female. But the story centres upon a core of three male protagonists. The second, played by a woman with a superb vocal range, is John Hunter's dour and dogged body-collector. To dissect, the surgeon needs fresh cadavers. Originally, the bodies of certain categories of criminals were sent for medical scrutiny after execution. But this supply was not enough to meet the growing demand. So *ad hoc* suppliers began to exhume dead bodies secretly to convey them to the anatomy theatres (until matters were regulated in 1832 by the Anatomy Act). Unsurprisingly, these secret traders – known as 'resurrection men' – were deeply unpopular. Above all, they were abhorred by all sincerely religious Christians. The corpse lies awaiting the Day of Judgment, when body and soul will arise together. What will happen if the corpse has been dismembered for the enlightenment of medical students?

In this case, John Hunter's assistant is a body-gatherer rather than a resurrection man. Nonetheless, he demonstrates the self-protective shell that dealing with fresh corpses requires. He is not a deeply thoughtful person but he does believe that the requirements of science give him validation for his actions. Unsentimental, yes. Highly tenacious, yes. But not unthinking. And the play unfolds almost tenderly the growing personal attachment between this dour

medical assistant and the Irish giant, who is being tracked down as a prime candidate for dissection. The assistant talks of science, while his prey makes him laugh.

Historically, the real Irish giant, Charles Byrne (1761-83), was said to be over eight feet tall. Later medical examination of his skeleton puts his height at 7'7" and explains it as the result of disordered pituitary gland. (It's a genetic condition, known as acromegalic gigantism). Byrne came from Tyrone in Ulster and made his way to London, where he exhibited himself in 'freak' museum as a 'modern living colossus'. He took to drink. Lost his painfully accumulated earnings. Died young. And his body was purchased, against his expressed desire, by John Hunter for his Hunterian Museum, in the Royal College of Surgeons (Lincoln's Inn Fields, London). Byrne's cadaver was boiled in acid to reveal his skeleton. It remained on display for many years, initially in Hunter's private collection and latterly in the Royal College of Surgeon's Hunterian Museum. [In 2019, its display is subject to reconsideration, while the Museum is closed for refurbishment until 2021].

Skeleton of Charles Byrne, the 'Irish Giant' (1761-83),
as displayed for many years in
the Hunterian Museum, Royal College of Surgeons, London.

Putting realistic flesh onto this sad story was the brilliant achievement of the third actor, Neil Haigh. He portrays a giant who is somewhat simple, somewhat bemused by London. He is fond of his tipple and loves a joke. He has a disarming giggle, much repeated – which might have been annoying but became endearing. And he is shown as pious (rather than deeply spiritual) and anxious for the future of his soul. His religion is indicated as Catholic, since the Giant crosses himself frequently, but the play makes no reference to any potential doctrinal differences between Irish Catholicism and English/Scottish Protestantism. In fact, the Giant's main cultural references relate to his Irishness. He murmurs about his descent from the old Irish kings and his fellowship with the 'little people' – the play here borrowing from Hilary Mantel's fictionalised account of his life in *The Giant, O'Brien* (1998). The audience ends up caring for him and empathising with his dread of dissection.

After all this, the Giant dies laughing. Yet Byrne's bones are indeed purchased for 'science' and the audience of students sees his cadaver being boiled in acid by the dour assistant. Finally, the Giant's organs are spilled across the stage. But it is explicitly stated – no surprise – that the location of Byrne's soul cannot be found. Overall, the play takes a few detours that bring a loss of momentum. It also poses many more questions than it answers. It does not campaign against medical knowledge of anatomy; nor does it oppose cremation (say) instead of full bodily interment. It does highlight, however, the issue of informed consent, when it comes to medical experimentation. The post-eighteenth-century 'progress' in science and scientific method demands a comparable advance in humanist empathy and respect for individuals, whether large or small. At the very end, the audience is asked if it has any questions? We replied by applauding. And left thinking.