

THEATRE

The brutal price of sexual freedom

Asking For It is a powerful, ugly and lonely play, writes **Emer O'Kelly**

Asking For It

The Everyman, Cork

The Snapper

Gate Theatre, Dublin

EMMA O'Donovan is a thoroughly unpleasant young woman; not a child: she's 18. She's also a liar, cruel, and uses her perfect looks against those less fortunate. So she must have been "asking for it" when she was gang-raped at a party, by four young men who have been her friends for years, and one of whom was her best friend's boyfriend... until Emma stole him?

That's the basis of Louise O'Neill's 2015 novel *Asking for It*, now adapted as a play by Meadhbh McHugh and Annabelle Comyn, the latter of whom directs it for Landmark and the Everyman Theatre, playing at Cork Midsummer Festival and scheduled for the Abbey in the autumn.

Emma was drunk and had taken drugs, so she has no memory of what happened. She's just bruised and battered and dumped unconscious on her parents' doorstep. But the rape appears in graphic horror on social media, with the young men identifiable.

Emma goes to the gardai. But this is a small town where everyone gets involved.

The local priest tells the congregation from the pulpit that "everyone is innocent until proven guilty" and he doesn't mean Emma. That what he says is true, even in the era of "#ibelieveher", changes nothing. Social media, drink, drugs, and a tendency to "put herself about"



Left, Venetia Bowe, Darragh Shannon, Lauren Coe, Síle Maguire and Sean Doyle in 'Asking For It'. Below, Simon Delaney and Hazel Clifford in 'The Snapper'



means, O'Neill suggests, that Emma will always be the young woman who "asked for it".

And in so being, she is the one who destroys the lives around her as well as her own: her parents, devastated and ostracised; the families of the men involved; her own innocent boyfriend; and her beloved brother, away from home and so possibly the only one with some clarity of vision: he doesn't want her to back down from her complaint.

Asking for It is a powerful, ugly, lonely play: Annabelle Comyn confronts the brutality of sexual freedom and the objectification of what has lost all connection with young love, and become a market place where bodies are the currency: the "entitled" wages for young men, and the price young women pay, often unwillingly.

That the adaptation is not entirely successful is irrelevant with the second act played out largely with a

voice-over of Emma's inner conflict: it is still powerfully alienating in forcing us to confront what our society has become.

Paul O'Mahony's towering glass set is a cold and emotionally unyielding superstructure that leaves the wonderful ensemble cast menacingly adrift, to be engulfed with the hideously suggestive imagery of Jack

'She is bruised and battered and dumped on her parents' doorstep'

Phelan's video design, where Lauren Coe as Emma is the tiny fly trapped in its venomous amber. And while all the performances are convincing and evocative, there must be special plaudits to Paul Mescal as Emma's

brother, and to a towering, savagely disintegrating portrayal of her father from Frank McCusker.

RODDY Doyle's work is accepted as the essence of Dublin; and Dubliners are proud of it. But in one way it is unique, and utterly alien to one of the great markers of Irish literature.

There is no self-pity: Doyle characters remain at worst philosophical about slings and arrows, at best ribald and obstinately optimistic. Actually, you could call them a travesty; just as their inventor is a traitor to the victimhood we all hold dear in literature and life. How dare he?

It's the 1980s on a working class housing estate in Dublin. Twenty-year-old Sharon Rabbitte is pregnant, and despite having loving, non-judgmental parents, is refusing the name the father.

She can't really: Sharon has her own moral code, and not merely does the father live across the road, he's the married father of one of her best mates. And the pregnancy happened in a drunken flash (both of them were drunk). And that, in Sharon's tough little head, doesn't make her a victim; she's mistress of her own destiny.

The Snapper was a hugely successful film; now Doyle has adapted it for the stage at the Gate — and it has lost none of its charm, humour and wisdom, despite some necessary truncation of sub-plots and minor characters.

It's played at a frenetic pace under Roisin McBrinn's direction in a series of movable sets designed by Paul Wills that are a cross between 3D picture frames and claustrophobic local authority housing. (Nowadays, thousands of families would consider them luxurious: the years don't always bring progress.)

Hazel Clifford is a gutsy, utterly lovable Sharon, and Simon Delaney the equally lovable, bristlingly loyal, foul-mouthed and soft touch Jimmy: a paterfamilias to be cherished. Hilda Fay keeps her "moidhered" coping motherhood in a kind of placid intensity, while Simon O'Gorman makes a hapless "villain" of the piece as the putative father of the Snapper. And there's a glorious cameo from Carmel Stephens as his wife.

Jason Cullen and Cameron Simpson alternate as the bicycle-mad hapless little brother Darren, with a sextet of brazenly talented small girls interchanging as the irrepressible Rabbitte twins, fast growing into photocopies of Sharon and her saucy mates. Real life was never like this, for all the acclaim for Roddy Doyle having his ear to the ground, but *The Snapper* is the better for it.

It's a glorious romp through a life that will always come right in the end, if you believe in it. And with cracking Dub wit along the way, this production is a sure-fire summer winner.