

A traumatic night in the life of a fifth-year schoolgirl plays out to a mixture of music, booze and sex, says *Fiona Charleton*

"Girls are all the same," sneers teenager Dylan (Darragh Shannon) in the stage adaptation of Louise O'Neill's controversial novel *Asking for It*. "They get wasted and get a bit slutty, then in the morning try and pretend it never happened." Anxious to look cool, Emma (Lauren Coe) laughs – a bit too loudly. Adapted by writer Meadhbh McHugh in collaboration with director Annabelle Comyn, this provocative play asks a simple question: is a girl getting "wasted" and "a bit slutty" a get-out-of-jail-free card for rapists?

Told by Emma in a first-person narrative through flashbacks, we are on her side from the start. "Everyone wants to hear my story," she begins, her fragility painfully clear. That story begins a year ago, and we meet her shallow mother (Ali White), who seems to have taken parenting lessons from Kris Jenner. "You look beautiful today," she witters at her daughter every morning.

Pumped up by an insecure vanity, fifth-year schoolgirl Emma ticks all the "cool" boxes: skinny, popular, vegetarian. Her friends don't, though. "You look like you're Amish or something," she sneers at Zoe (Venetia Bowe). The role of Emma's sidelined girl squad – Zoe, Maggie and Ali – is key. Maggie wryly describes herself as "lady-in-waiting to the queen bee". Emma's bitchy remarks needle, but Coe exudes a sweetness that defies any Mean Girls caricature, and the group of friends' dynamic doesn't entirely ring true.

The gang of lads who satellite them operate more organically. Here we meet Seán (an engaging Seán Doyle), Maggie's boyfriend Eli (Kwaku Fortune), Dylan and nice boy-next-door Conor (Frank Blake). Like a bunch of oversexed coyotes, their banter is peppered with references to masturbation, getting wasted and getting laid.



Playing the shame game

THE CRITICS

“The set contracts like a telescope, trapping the family in their kitchen bunker

Shannon, in particular, nails Dylan with his creepy fantasy about "spice bag" sex.

Perhaps it was first-night nerves, but the ensemble could have been tighter. The dance number did work well, evoking a magical sense of youthful exuberance. With the constant use of voiceovers and soliloquies, one wonders whether movement director Sue Mythen could harness more of this energy.

The pivotal moment occurs at a "free gaff" after a football match. Like Dolly Parton's Jolene, Emma could have her choice of men and chooses Paul (Charlie Maher), the county star. Recreating a party atmosphere on stage is tough but Comyn and her set designer Paul O'Mahony succeed spectacularly. O'Mahony's ingenious set consists of a wall of perspex squares which shapeshifts. During the party scene it morphs into a brilliantly lit

double-height buzzing hothouse. Jack Phelan's video design and Sinead McKenna's lighting combine intoxicatingly with blaring music, booze and pill popping.

Emma is in heaven. This is her chance to escape boredom and fade into blackout oblivion. An onslaught of graphic video images and a disturbing soundscape portray what happens next in a way that words cannot. Next day, when an "Easy Emma" Facebook page appears, featuring photos of her being gang-raped, her world implodes.

In the second and longer act, the script and Comyn's direction are more compelling. The set contracts like a telescope, trapping the family in their kitchen bunker, hidden from judging eyes and social media trolls. Now Coe's Emma is perfect as the shell-shocked girl who has been both violated and shamed while White's

Haunted look Coe in her powerful portrayal of Emma

portrayal of her demented mother, who disappears into a bottle of wine, is a masterclass of middle-class bewildered despair. Her clangers about the lads being "good boys, really" elicit gasps from the audience, who hang on to every word.

Emma's protective brother Bryan, played with frustrated fury by Paul Mescal, yells into a vacuum. The family's moral compass has smashed into shards of blame. The agonising family dinner table scene is worthy of Harold Pinter with pent-up Dad's outburst a memorable moment.

This play, produced by Landmark and Cork's Everyman Theatre and which transfers to the Abbey Theatre in November, is not traumatic, it's pure trauma. ■

Asking for It
Everyman, Cork ★★★★★