



Venetia Bowe, Lauren Coe and Darragh Shannon in Asking for It

ROS KAVANAGH

Harrowing story of sexual assault is uncompromising and impressive



SARA KEATING

Asking For It

Abbey Theatre, Dublin

Until November 25

Rating: ★★★★★

Louise O'Neill's novel *Asking For It* was published in 2015, just prior to the massive cultural conversation kick-started by #MeToo and, in Ireland, *Waking the Feminists*. The book's portrayal of the gang rape of a teenager at a party was particularly effective because of its moral complexity.

Its protagonist, 18-year-old Emma, is a singularly unsympathetic heroine. She is promiscuous and sexually provocative, and advises her best friend Zoe, who has been sexually assaulted by one of their friends, to put up and shut up. "You don't want to be that girl," she warns her.

Emma becomes "that girl" when she puts herself in a precarious situation at a party to celebrate her small town's success in a football match. Under the influence of drugs and alcohol, she seduces the team's star player, only to find herself unable to extricate herself from his firm grip when she has had enough.

When she wakes up the next morning, she finds herself bruised, bloody and unable to remember what happened the night before. The internet, however, has recorded it all. Emma, "Queen Bee of Ballinatoon", is relegated to the position of fallen woman, and when she decides to press charges, the town must take sides, exposing a culture of casual misogyny that - incredibly - reaches deep into Emma's family as well.

Meadhbh McHugh's adaptation, written in collaboration with director Annabelle Comyn, ensures that Emma (the excellent Lauren Coe) stays at the centre of the story. Using a recorded voice, we are given access to Emma's inner thoughts as well as her often contradictory outward actions. If, at times, the swing between dual stage realities exhausts itself, the physical manifestation of Emma's split psyche helps to ensure that - no matter how reprehensible her own actions have been - we remain aware that she is the victim, even when others change their minds.

Paul O'Mahony's monolithic perspex set slides and reforms itself to become various locations: the school, the park, the house where Emma is violated, as well as, finally, her family home. It is most effective in the party scene, however, where, under Sinead McKenna's hazy lights, Comyn stages a peep show, offering titillating glimpses of bodies

coming together and moving apart in various configurations.

This production from Landmark Productions and the Everyman Theatre is tough to watch, particularly in the second half, when Emma's world closes in upon itself in the aftermath of the assault. Indeed, the domestic scenes are almost as disturbing as the rape scene, as we see Emma's parents (played with confusion and rage by Ali White and Frank McCusker) struggle to contain their anger with their daughter, while her brother Brian (Paul Mescal), perhaps the only sympathetic character in this sorry story, rallies to protect her.

Despite its grim conclusion, this is a story that needs to be told again and again, if we expect to change attitudes to sexual assault in Ireland.