

Blackbirds at Dawn

By Donna Worthington

Cumbria University, 15th September 2017

The programme notes for the play quoted *Hamlet* in which a play is especially contrived with a moral purpose – to expose the King's evil: "The play's the thing/Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King." Donna Worthington's play openly confronts the contemporary issue of human trafficking and slavery. From the outset, this dramatic production proceeded with directness and power in portraying some of the cruelty, suffering and injustice that is actually widespread but hidden in our so-called civilised society.

The play exploited one fixed setting – a sinister tenement of trapped lives. A sense of claustrophobia and imprisonment permeated all the scenes. Theatrically, great use was made of lighting effects, so that there was movement to blackouts as well as brighter moments.

The context of the play moved hauntingly from the surrealism of some other imagined world to the grim reality of this one with, for example, reference to an Irish background and contemporary features such as CCTV. Thus we shuttled uneasily between futuristic and present experience and the play gained a universality by it.

The raw material of the play was of necessity, grim. However, this highly theatrical production made great use of music and dance (sometimes hauntingly with masks), so that the message was conveyed not just in words and obvious actions, but in the more subtle suggestiveness of choreographed movements such as dancers collapsing to the floor or nursery rhymes becoming laden with the exact opposite of childish playfulness.

The dialogue was generally powerful and harsh, with evocative use at times of repetition and poeticism with some memorable statements such as, "You'll never be cold again" or "This isn't my body." Good use was made of non-sequitur, unanswered questions, crossed purposes, interrogation and threat. Some of the scenes were almost unbearable in tension and the sense of fear in the audience was palpable.

The play's effectiveness was also brought about by universally strong acting from the young and talented cast, who rendered emotion and actions which belied their years and drove them beyond their personal experience. The performances were powerful individually but also corporately in terms of the interactions and relationships.

Clearly, a play such as this is not cosy or comfortable viewing. But it does convey the horror it confronts with clarity and power.

Fr Kevin Murphy