

Faith Healer: the scalding power of memory



By Catherine Siggins

Although it has been scientifically proven that lying is part and parcel of everyday social interactions and politics, recently it has become so fantastic and prevalent in certain circles (see "alternative facts" or "truthful hyperbole") that it borders on mass gaslighting.

Hence, it seems apt that Ron Sossi, artistic director of Odyssey Theatre Ensembles, has chosen to stage Brian Friel's "Faith Healer", a play that questions the nature of truth and faith, ritual and remembrance, hope and despair, exile and homecoming, self-doubt and self-belief, isolation and belonging.

Francis "Frank" Hardy (Paul Norwood) says he found from a young age that he had the power to heal. His curse is that it doesn't happen at will; rather it's something supernatural, channeled from the divine. He has made his living traveling from small country town to small country town in Scotland and Wales, one night stands in cold shabby halls, with the promise of miracles for the local inhabitants. He can tell before each performance when it will work and when it won't, which is most of the time. Plagued by doubts and feelings of inadequacy, his only escape is through the liberal consumption of whiskey, mesmeric recitation of all the names of the towns he's visited in Wales and Scotland,

Truth and faith, ritual and remembrance, hope and despair all find their way to the surface in a revival of Brian Friel's play at the Odyssey Theatre



THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE: Paul Norwood plays Francis Hardy (photo: Enci Box)

and the emotional abuse of his wife, Grace (Diana Cignoni). With them travel Teddy (Ron Bottitta), his loyal Cockney manager and general factotum.

Performed in four gripping monologues, the divergent stories paint a picture of their often-squalid existence together, the details and facts of which vary greatly from person to person. They are all skilled in the art of self-deception. What we learn with each new telling of the story is that Frank has erased from his narrative his real past, his family history, the death of his child, and any evidence of pain from these events. Grace knows him as a twisted man, who had the need to "adjust, to refashion, to recreate everything around him" including her. It is Teddy who paints the most accurate picture of two co-dependent damaged souls, who fight and love with equal passion, both searching for something they only attain in flashes. A borderline personality, incapable of anything but self-interest, and the other looking for unconditional love,

neither finding either. He is however incapable of acknowledging his feeling and why he dedicated his life to them. What emerges is a fascinating but tragic picture of three people on the margins of society, each desperately looking for belonging and to heal their own wounds.

Faith Healer's rich language and syntax draws on the sense of ritual and prayer, rooted in the Irish oral tradition of storytelling, poetic and conversational in equal measure. As such, it requires the strongest of performers who can hold your attention, as they stand on the stage alone, weaving their entertaining tales to hide their denial and delusion. Paul Norwood, Diana Cignoni and Ron Bottitta are such a cast, well-balanced and engaging. Norwood's understated performance charms, as he offers up a man who knows defeat, rather than the mountebank of earlier years. Bottitta is poignant as the beer-swilling cheeky chappie Teddy, and gets the big laughs recounting stories of his previous specialty acts. Cignoni electrifies. She has Grace hopped up

with the raw energy of anguish, balanced on the edge of madness, and rather than victimizing her, she gives us a woman who has had a self-realization that will ultimately break her.

Is it the story of a charismatic man who may be the salvation for a suffering public, or who may be a conman who takes advantage of those already vulnerable, to prove some notion of his own superiority? In the end, when all the stories are told, Friel leaves it up to each audience member to decide in which story they have faith.

•Performances of Faith Healer on Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m. through May 12. Additional weeknight performance scheduled on Wednesday, May 8, at 8 p.m. Discounts are available at select performances for seniors, students and patrons under 30; call theater for details.

•The Odyssey Theatre is located at 2055 S. Sepulveda Blvd., West Los Angeles, 90025. For reservations and information, call (310) 477-2055 or go to OdysseyTheatre.com.