

EXPLORING THE ETERNAL PUZZLE OF A FADING MIND

Tale of a scientist whose brain disorder led her to painting is truly absorbing

MICHAEL MOFFATT
SHOW OF THE WEEK

UnRavelled

Streaming online until March 31



UnRavelled is absorbing, moving, and certainly one of the most unusual plays I have ever seen.

It was recently streamed from Trinity College and will be available for free online until March 31.

Written by Jake Broder, and produced by the Global Brain Health Institute at Trinity College and by the University of California, it was filmed in California last December using the most basic format possible, given the restrictions of Covid.

It's a profound look at the nature and results of brain deterioration, and the mysterious, painful, sometimes wonderful world it can evoke and create for the sufferer.

It tells the real-story of Anne Adams (Lucy Davenport), a gifted scientist, who at the age of 53 lost her passion for science and became totally absorbed in painting. It wasn't a conscious choice.

She produced some extraordinary artwork under the effects of primary progressive aphasia, a form of frontal temporal dementia, that alters connections in the brain, affects language ability, and can cause an outburst of artistic creativity.

It's the same brain problem that hit the composer Ravel, most famous for his rhythmic repetitive masterpiece Bolero.

The play is shown in split screen format, with Anne's husband Robert (Rob Nagle) on one side and Anne on the other, talking to each other. We see them first as they're playing Scrabble, gently joshing each other.

But things aren't quite right. Anne is showing signs of antagonism, and Robert is wondering why she does nothing but paint strawberries. Are they just two touchy people? It soon becomes



clear what's going on.

Anne gave up laboratory work eight months previously after an accident to their son. Robert's job involves trying to develop a complicated traffic system, and he's working two jobs so she can paint.

At one stage we see Anne painting while listening to Bolero. Then she realises she hadn't actually turned on the music. She was painting Bolero from hearing it in her head, taking a concept in one form and translating it into something completely different on canvas. Not just painting an abstract idea of the music, but following the logic and showing the

complexities of the original. She couldn't play Bolero on the piano but she could paint it.

She has revealing imaginary conversations with Ravel (who died in 1937). They have each had strange moments of forgetfulness and they each misuse a knife in the same way. Ravel relates the inexplicable ori-



Dr. Anne Adams



IN LIVING COLOUR: Actors Leo Marks, Lucy Davenport and Rob Nagle, and, left, the play's subject Anne Adams

gins of Bolero in his mind. He hates it, calling it a composition with no music in it.

Anne is eventually brought to a neurologist, Dr Miller. At intervals Miller (Leo Marks) addresses us, giving a talk on the relationship between emotion and colour, the physiological facts behind the illness, and the line between pathological urge and conscious choice. He goes into the deteriora-

tion in the front part of the brain, but the strange enhancement of the back of the brain.

We are shown Anne's paintings of Bolero and of numbers, astonishing works of art, in which she also solves Robert's traffic problem by a painting that's like the circulation of blood.

And a visit to Ghent produces an extraordinary painting done from memory.

The play dodges none of the painful consequences of the illness: the possibilities of surgery, prolonged illness, unlikely cure and death.

For Robert, Anne is already barely there mentally, despite her presence in his life.

The production allows the art, scientific explanations and the reality of the situation to tell the story without the intrusion of unnecessary dramatic devices to heighten the emotional power of this sad but surprisingly inspiring experience.

■ To watch it for free go to UnravelledPlay.com.

DEAR IRELAND - THE RETROSPECTIVE

Last year, the Abbey presented three editions of *Dear Ireland*, starting with 50 plays by 50 writers, followed by 20 letters from audience members, rounding off in December with 24 postcards from under-represented voices in

society. This week in partnership with Culture Ireland, the Abbey presents *Dear Ireland: Reflections On A Pandemic* - some of the performances from the above trilogy, including a reading by the recently deceased Rynagh O'Grady.

Reflections On A Pandemic will premiere at 6pm on March 20 and will run for a week as part of Culture Ireland's five-day festival (March 17-21) on its YouTube channel cultureireland.ie. All events free online.