

Theater Review:

*The Seafarer, at The Irish Repertory Theatre***The Devil's Disciple**

By Eric Uhlfelder

It was his remarkable portrayal of a historical Northern officer during the US civil war, Colonel Robert Shaw, that first brought my attention to Matthew Broderick. His strong, understated performance of this tragic character in the highly acclaimed movie *Glory* has stayed with me ever since its premier in 1989.

So it was a treat for me to see him up close in his latest theatrical production, *The Seafarer*, at the Irish Repertory Theater in Chelsea.

This is an Irish, depressing, Faustian tale set in Dublin. It moves effortlessly from a lost lot of drunken middle-aged men, who banter about every nonsensical matter that wanders into their heads, to something mysteriously satanical. In the process, *The Seafarer* is another demonstration of the West Village's own theatrical son's wide range of characters that he has brought to life during his more than three decades in film and theater.

Written by the award-winning playwright Connor McPherson, whose *Shining City* also starred Broderick at the Irish Repertory Theatre, *The Seafarer* is a Christmas fable of sorts told in contemporary realism. References to the euro and cell phones clearly mark it in the 21st century.

But the set is anachronistically derived from several generations earlier. It's an authentically staged shabby small Irish living room, strewn with beer bottles and cans, some cheaply reproduced religious images, adorning the walls, and a worn-out mish-mash of furniture. But there's a feel that this was once a comfortable middle-class home.

Broderick, who has spent a good deal of time in Ireland, said in interview with *WestView News*, "It's common for grown kids to take over their parents home after they pass." Without money or a family to care for, these kinds of places can go to seed. And he has come across characters like those in this play.

The home belongs to the rotund Richard Harkin (played with splendid inebriation by Colin McPhillamy). He shares it with his hard-edged brother Sharky (Andy Murray), who, during most of the play, appears to be the only responsible character on stage. Always trying to keep order, Sharky's physiognomy not so subtly hints at a shady past. Broderick's character (Mr. Lockhart) reveals such after he accompanies Nicky Giblin (Tim Ruddy), an acquaintance of the brothers, to their home on Christmas Eve.

While Broderick makes his appearance 40 minutes into the story, it's his character that stirs it into the supernatural through



THIS IS A PERFORMANCE WORTH SEEING: Matthew Broderick in *The Seafarer* at the Irish Repertory Theater. Photo by Carl Rosegg.

the longest monologue of the evening when he explains his past relationship with Sharky, where Lockhart is from, and to where he intends to bring Sharky.

If all this seems muddled, well, I intend it to be so lest I spoil the story.

A tell is best provided by Ben Brantley's *NY Times* review of the play's Broadway premiere in 2007, when he wrote: "Hell is just a cosmically magnified version of daily existence."

So while *The Seafarer* might appear for a while as a nonsensical romp through an alcoholic haze, it turns far darker during many hands of poker played out in the second half of the show, where far more than money is wagered. But unlike many plays of this genre, the ending surprises when it turns out the last hand is misread, freeing one soul; sending another in search of his next bounty.

This is a performance worth seeing.

But with one caveat: listening to some of the dialogue is like attending a foreign production in language that's familiar but not altogether understood. Yes, it's English. But the pace, dialect, cultural references, and drunken slurring makes it sometimes hard to pick up on all the thoughts and nuances the playwright has conjured.

But don't let this turn you away, as splendid acting helps translate this disturbing, farcical tale about wasted lives and second chances.

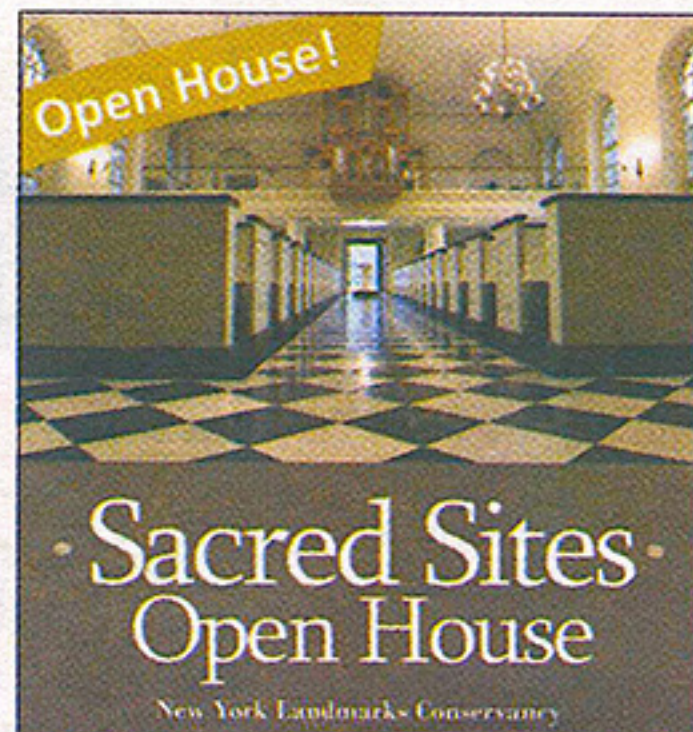
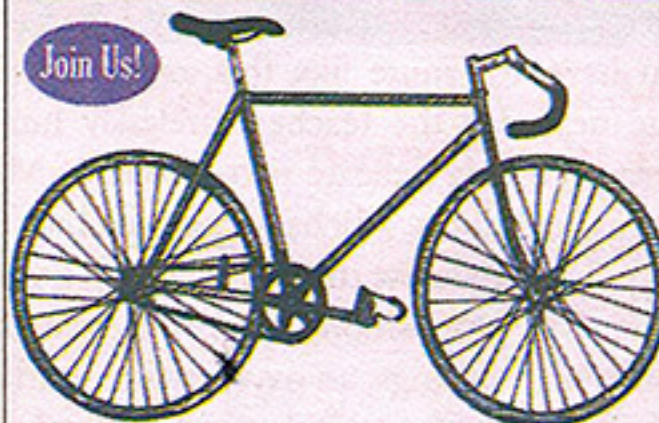
The Seafarer runs through 24 May at the Irish Repertory Theater at 132 West 22nd Street in New York. For information, see: www.irishrep.org

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