

## ***Maggie May* at the Finborough Theatre, London – 5 April 2019**

If you believe the programme note for this 1964 musical, currently enjoying its first London revival in half a century, its co-author, Alun Owen 'was born in Liverpool'. No, he bloody wasn't. Although Owen was undoubtedly a Scouse writer, he was born in Menai Bridge in 1925, and lived in Wales until he was eight. Owen was part of that distinctive group, the Liverpool Welsh, an example of what we might, on the model of the Irish 'Paddyaspora', refer to as the Taffyaspora. Owen's Liverpool writings often include Welsh characters, from his first play *Progress to the Park* (1959) to the irascible television director played by Victor Spinetti in *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), probably his best-remembered work.

*Maggie May* is set in Liverpool's docks, and tells the story of a Lime Street prostitute, here sentimentalised as a romantic who went on the game after being left by her true love, Joe Casey, the son of a pre-war trade union firebrand. When Joe returns, to start work on the docks, she considers 'reclaiming my amateur status', at the same time as he leads a strike against the bosses, represented by the corrupt trade union leader Willie Morgan. The political plot climaxes with a *Julius Caesar*-like battle of speeches between the Irish Casey and North Walian Morgan, a clash of the titans between blarney and *hwyl*.

Songs are by the equally diasporic (Jewish, East End) Lionel Bart, written during the period when he was trying to find a follow-up to his biggest hit, *Oliver!* (1959). The show originally ran for a respectable, but not stunning, 501 performances, in between the WW2 -set *Blitz!* (1962) and the notorious Robin Hood-themed flop *Twang!!* (1965) - notice the increasing desperation indicated by the inflation of exclamation marks. According to a programme note from the original production, Bart brought the project to Owen, who had to teach him the Liverpool dialect - 'part Irish, part Welsh, and part catarrh', and the script's decorated with flashes of Scouse wit - 'Who knitted your face and dropped a stitch?'. The musical style mixes jazz, folk songs - we get snatches of both the titular sailors' ballad (familiar to Beatles fans from the cleaned-up version on *Let It Be*) and 'Leave her Johnny, leave her' - Brecht/Weill cabaret, and a little rock 'n' roll. The small-scale musical arrangement here doesn't always serve the style - solo piano isn't the best accompaniment for folk and jazz; I found myself wanting the roughness of guitar and tea chest bass.

And, in the end, that's the problem. *Maggie May* was an example of the British *verismo* musical - shows featuring working-class, usually female, characters, and vernacular musical styles - folk, music hall, ballads. Bart himself helped to invent the style with *Fings Ain't What They Used T'Be* (1959), writing songs to the script by the Barnardo Boy and occasional jailbird Frank Norman. *Verismo* was the product of a very specific movement in British history - the post war flourishing of working-class cultures that had birthed both kitchen-sink theatre and the folk music revival. Now, at a time when British culture (and theatre in particular) is increasingly patrician, it's hard to recapture that moment, the salt is missing. The cast biographies for this production show a lot of West End experience - Kara Lily Hayworth, who plays Maggie, was in the national tour of

*Cilla – the Musical*, and her performance has something of that performer’s wide-eyed charm - but there are few people here who are convincing as either prostitutes or dockers. In the end, this makes the drama hard to care about – to put it at its most basic, the story of a tart who regains her heart doesn’t work if you never believed in her profession in the first place.

Matthew Iliffe’s production does its best, with choreographer Sam Spencer-Lane providing impressively full-blooded dance routines in the Finborough’s intimate space, but the direction shows little sense of dramatic pacing – Maggie’s revelation of her profession to Joe and the offstage death of a docker, the event that prompts the strike, are both sailed past without any sense of weight. At times, the production goes out of its way to avoid any kind of hard edge – when Maggie tells an impecunious punter to “come back when you’re working and lopsided with pound notes’, the line is delivered with an affectionate stroke of the cheek. This is an efficient, glossy revival, but Bart’s score, and Owen’s script, leave you wishing for a production with a few more streaks in its mascara, and a little more dirt under its nails.

David Cottis

(*Maggie May* runs at the Finborough theatre until April 20)