

ART & CULTURE

This Woman's Work

Director Rachel Walshe tackles gender inequity in *Ironbound*

By Karen Greco



Donnla Hughes as Darja

In Martyna Majok's *Ironbound*, which begins performances at The Gamm Theatre on March 17, we meet Darja, a Polish immigrant struggling to get by on her cleaning job. Over the course of 20 years, Darja encounters three different men who offer her either love or financial security – never both. It's a stark portrait of what it means to be a woman fighting for survival in America.

First produced in 2016, the play feels even more urgent now, after COVID lockdowns pushed 3.5 million women out of the workforce. Women in front-line occupations – grocery store workers, health care aids, service industry staff – often lived precariously to begin with. Without health insurance, living paycheck to paycheck, the pandemic

heightened the inequities around work that were building over the decades.

"The pandemic laid bare the extreme weakness in our social fabric," says director Rachel Walshe. "In *Ironbound*, Darja's labor is undervalued. She's doing work others refuse to do."

Walshe points out that it's easy to romanticize the working-class hero. But with *Ironbound*, Darja's character doesn't fall into sentimentality. She is portrayed as a complex, full human. "She makes terrible decisions," says Walshe, noting that Darja can be unlikable. "She can be really awful to other people."

The title *Ironbound* comes from the neighborhood in Newark, New Jersey, where the play is set. But Walshe says there's symbolic power in that word. "An iron heart is at the

core of Darja's story. What does it cost something like Darja to not be able to be a full person, to not take emotional risks, not have the emotional resources?"

These are the plays – ones that interrogate the unpaid emotional labor borne by women – that Walshe feels drawn to. "When you look at most of the caregivers in this country, who are doing CNA work, nursing home work, child care work, they are working class women of color. They are immigrant women. They are responsible for some of the most intense, emotional, physical, psychologically demanding work that others won't do." It's work that often goes unrecognized.

"I came from a family of working class folks," says Walshe, who grew up in Warwick. "Nobody in my family was doing art for a living, that's for sure."

But when Walshe arrived at URI, a philosophy professor encouraged her to pursue theater. She headed to Chicago, where she got an MFA in directing from DePaul University. She spent two years in Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar studying Renaissance drama before returning to work professionally at some of their storied theaters, like Steppenwolf (the theater co-founded by actor Gary Sinise).

With a growing family and a teaching offer from URI, she and her artist-husband, also from Rhode Island, decided to return to the state. For a few years, they divided their time between the Creative Capital and the Windy City, eventually deciding to go all in on Rhody. "The realities of raising a family and being a working artist, and the benefits of having family nearby, outweighed the desire to be in Chicago. And I really loved teaching."

While Chicago is known as a theater town, Rhode Island's rich theater scene is bringing more professional artists to our small state. Walshe rattles off our many local theaters, from regional staple Trinity Rep to Mixed Magic to her artistic home, The Gamm. "Rhode Island audiences have an appetite for culture," she says. "But they demand we justify why they should sit through this difficult, highly charged material. I like that. It keeps me honest. As an artist, it means I'm constantly required to re-interrogate the purpose, the meaning, the value, the clarity, of a story." *Ironbound* plays at The Gamm Theatre from March 17 – April 10. GammTheatre.org

Director Rachel Walshe



Photo (L) by Cat Laine, (R) courtesy of The Gamm