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FEATURED

Theater Review: Gamm Theatre's 'Hangmen' delivers a mystery with plenty of laughs

By Kathie Raleigh Special to the Independent
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John Hardin and Abigail Milnor-Sweetser are shown as Peter Mooney and Shirley, respectively, in Gamm Theatre's current production of "Hangmen."

Photo Courtesy: Gamm Theatre/Cat Laine

WARWICK, R.I. — The term “gallows humor” must have been coined to describe the work of playwright Martin McDonagh, nowhere more literally than in “Hangmen,” now at the Sandra Feinstein Gamm Theatre.

The play checks all the McDonagh boxes: You laugh, and sometimes you're surprised at what's funny. You're shocked, but for purpose, not just shock value. You're intrigued by a mystery, but as it unfolds, you're not sure what's real and what isn't.

Ultimately, you're hooked. And at The Gamm, a flawless cast brings a pitch-perfect production to life.



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Set in a rural town in northern England, "Hangmen" takes place in 1965, just as the death penalty has been abolished in the United Kingdom. Harry Wade, described as "the second-best hangman in the country," is out of work, except that he and his wife, Alice, run a pub where locals habitually gather. The couple's daughter, Shirley, helps out.

Harry previously kept his feelings about his work to himself, but when a reporter stops by the pub looking for a story, his ego takes over – especially when the reporter, Clegg, brings up the more famous hangman, Albert Pierrepont. Clearly, there is a rivalry between the two, and Harry sees a chance to bring his own record to the forefront.

More provocative than the reporter, however, is a mysterious newcomer, Peter Mooney, a bit of a charmer but with an undercurrent of menace. The regulars, including a police inspector, don't know what to make of him, but Shirley gets drawn into a conversation.

Later, another non-regular shows up; it's Syd, Harry's former assistant hangman, with his own story to tell.

Just when you think you know where things are going, things change. Meaningful themes weave their way into the events. Unexpectedly, there is plenty to think about, from the death penalty – Pierrepont, the only real character in this fictional saga, famously said he never thought death was a

deterrent to crime – to provincialism, the ways we judge people, the things we tell ourselves to get through the day.

And meanwhile, we're still laughing. And then we're shocked. Clarity comes, but there is ambiguity. It's a rich mix that Tony Estrella, The Gamm's artistic director, directs with aplomb, as the McDonagh fan he admits to being.

That the cast seems so well chosen is a credit to both director and the actors, who are remarkably authentic in their portrayals. There isn't an emotional or comic misstep among all 11 in the cast, although Abigail Milnor-Sweetser, making her Gamm debut as Shirley, steals her share of scenes.

These characters fit perfectly into the set that depicts Harry's pub, with its old wooden bar, mismatched furnishings, beer taps that work, all shrouded in shadowy lighting.

A wider audience saw McDonagh's Oscar-nominated films "The Banshees of Inisherin" and "Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri," which also checked all the McDonagh boxes.

But neither was any funnier, more meaningful, engrossing or entertaining than The Gamm's "Hangmen." It is a theatrical feast.

Performances of "Hangmen" continue through Nov. 26 at The Gamm, 1245 Jefferson Blvd. Tickets are \$55-\$65; call (401) 723-4266 or visit gammtheatre.org/hangmen. For information on discounts and pay-what-you-wish rush tickets, visit gammtheatre.org/discounts.

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