

Enda Walsh's latest is kinetic, but less dark than usual, says Eithne Shortall

Community, wrote the essayist Marilynne Robinson, consists largely of imaginative love for people we do not know. We may be on speaking terms with certain neighbours, but for the most part it is the idea of community, rather than a quantifiable reality, that appeals. It is not all that different from the love, sympathy and kinship we can feel for characters that exist only in works of fiction.

Ballyturk is just such an imagined community. Two men (Cillian Murphy and Mikel Murfi) are confined to a room. They are nameless; when there is only one other, what need is there for titles? The duo expends energy by dancing and manically dressing for the day. When they are ready to go into the world, they turn towards a wall covered with drawings of human faces. These are the inhabitants of Ballyturk. The men throw darts at the collage and whichever portraits the darts land on are the characters they will embody for their pretend jaunt through town.

Murfi dons a yellow jumper, thus becoming Coady. He mimes entering the local shop run by Joyce, a miserable woman portrayed by Murphy in a hairnet. She resents Coady's bright jumper, regarding his decision to stand out as an assertion that he is above her. Other inhabitants of this fictitious town include Marnie, a bingo whizz and Joyce's rival, and Larry, a tough guy cum ladies' man. Ballyturk is an undoubtedly Irish region, but its proportions shift between the infiniteness of the men's imaginations and the minuteness of the room where it is depicted.

The madcap energy, deeply dark



Jump to the beat

humour and testing of innocence make Ballyturk immediately recognisable as an Enda Walsh creation. The imagined townsfolk and naïve protagonist resonate with *Misterman* (1999, reworked in 2011), a previous hit for Walsh, Murphy, the Galway Arts Festival and

Landmark Productions.

Yet with references to sausages, affected dance moves and the appearance of characters in their tights-whities, Ballyturk is perhaps most reminiscent of *The Walworth Farce*. Walsh's

2006 play looked at the bonds of family and how this trust can be manipulated. His new work readdresses it towards friendship. Murfi's character may have some knowledge of an outside world, but Murphy knows nothing beyond this room. When he finds a fly, and becomes elated by the existence of a third living entity, Murfi kills it and says it was only a piece of dust.

As is the case with Walsh's previous work, nods towards Beckett are made clear. "Have we eaten properly?" asks Murfi. "We should," replies Murphy. While the power balance, dwindling supplies and apocalyptic possibilities recall *Endgame*.

The action is set in "no time, no place." Although, the greying kitchen appliances and floral deck chairs suggest that the universe has at least made it as far as the 1970s. Alarm clocks sound as sequences slip illogically into each other as in dreams. Eventually, the third character (Stephen Rea) appears, stunning the duo into silence. Murphy's ageing ingénue has no concept of time, but is now informed of the existence of mortality. Rea's character could be the grim reaper, creator of life or author of this imaginative community. "Didn't you know I'd come back," he asks, reminding us that, whatever else, he is the Godot that finally shows up.

Walsh has embarked on a screenwriting career in recent years, most notably with Steve McQueen's *Hunger*, but his commitment to the stage has not wavered. The theatrical values in Ballyturk are magnificent. The sparks from Murphy and Murfi's kinetic performances are such that the show is as likely to finish in a ball of fire as in several dislocated limbs. The existence of the Ballyturk community rests on these men.

The comedy is over-the-top

Express yourself Cillian Murphy, left, and Mikel Murfi in Ballyturk

nutty and Walsh, who also directs, pushes the actors to their limits. Helen Atkinson's sound design and Adam Silverman's lighting are as authoritarian as the most apocalyptic thunder storm, while Teho Teardo's musical composition is perhaps the show's most arresting component.

The magnitude of the experience comes from the production not the script. While continuing to prove that emotion can happily exist without comprehension, Ballyturk's arresting points are more intellectual than visceral. This play doesn't elicit the suffocation of *Bedbound* (2000) or anguished tension of *Misterman*. The breach between naivety and meanness has been narrowed; there isn't the same pit of black humour in which mirthless jibes can echo.

Walsh's work tends to have a "thanks be to God" factor; a statement uttered when the performance has ended and we may go in peace. With this latest play, you would happily sit through it again the following night. Not quite the gut wrench Walsh tends to deliver, Ballyturk is a more temperate achievement. **G**

Stephen Rea plays the Godot that shows up

Ballyturk ★★★★★
Black Box, Galway until July 27;
Olympia, Dublin, Aug 7-23;
Cork Opera House, Aug 26-30

THE CRITICS