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REVIEW

In Boston Playwrights' 'Honey Trap,' There Is No Escaping Northern Ireland's Troubles

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By [Carolyn Clay](#)



Barlow Adamson as Dave and Maureen Keiller as Sonia in "The Honey Trap." (Courtesy Kalman Zabarsky/Boston Playwrights' Theatre)

Memory and terrorists play tricks in Leo McGann’s gripping new play “The Honey Trap.” But they’re not the only deceivers in this dissembling dance of past and present set to the music of The Troubles that rattled Northern Ireland during much of the second half of the 20th century.

“The Honey Trap,” seen here in a professional workshop production by [Boston Playwrights’ Theatre](#) and Boston University College of Fine Arts School of Theatre (through Feb. 26), begins in 2014 with an interview that is part of an oral history gathering similar to the Belfast Project undertaken by Boston College in 2001. That project drew international attention when its supposedly confidential interviews with paramilitaries on both sides of The Troubles were subpoenaed in hopes of apportioning blame for some long-ago murders.

Here, a young female American emissary of the oral history project is visiting England to record the reminiscence of a former British Army soldier, part of a peacekeeping force deployed to Ireland in the 1970s, whose agenda includes more than just telling his side of an ugly story. From this cat-and-mouse conversation we flash back to 1979 at a pub in Lisburn (near Belfast) to see the “honey trap” — in which pretty girls were used by the Irish Republican Army to lure enemies to ambush and slaughter — baited.



Conrad Sundqvist-Olmos as Young Dave and Ben Swimmer as Bobby. (Courtesy Kalman Zabarsky/Boston Playwrights’ Theatre)

Thus the talented McGann — who was born and raised in Belfast, schooled at Oxford and is currently an MFA candidate in playwriting at Boston University — draws his addresses past and present into the tangled web of a play that, in an earlier draft, won the National Partners of the American Theatre Playwriting Excellence Award at the 2016 Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival. This staging, helmed by MFA in directing candidate Adam Kassim, is part of a season of Boston University New Play Initiative productions manned by students and professionals working together. Gritty and well-acted, it vividly explores the conflict in Northern Ireland without ever seeming like a history lesson.

In the opening scene, ex-British Army corporal Dave, now a man in his late 50s, is speaking into a tape recorder manned by Emily, a 20-something “Yank” journalist taking his account of a long-ago incident in which Dave’s young friend and protégé, Bobby, was lured by lovelies to his death at the hands of their IRA comrades. But it’s something of a contest as to who is controlling the interview. Emily wishes to keep the talk professional, objective and one-sided. Jocular loner Dave would like to make it a two-way street — to find out just why she’s talking to *him* and who else the oral-history project may be shielding.

As Dave’s memories materialize to one side of Jeffrey Petersen’s effective set — a grim arrangement of brick walls, glass block and corrugated metal sliders topped by one shattered window glowing red — Dave’s younger self, 24, and Bobby, 21, are in a bar downing a few beers, engaging in friendly games of one-upmanship and exchanging philosophic confidences about marital fidelity. Also, they are being eyed by a couple of nice-looking Irish women. Eventually Dave goes over to talk, and the four start a little kiss-and-banter. Abruptly, Dave decides to return to nearby barracks while Bobby follows the “lasses” to his fate.

McGann creates in Dave more than just a viable subject for an oral-history project: he’s an avuncular if haunted guy with both an inner and outer agenda. He’s also less out of touch if more broken than he appears to be. And Barlow Adamson imbues this central character with an apt combination of ruthlessness, loneliness and beguilement. Conrad Sundqvist-Olmos, as young Dave, flaunts the same braggadocios, near-bullying charm as well as the gift for rationalization that will serve his older, more calculating self. Ben Swimmer’s Bobby is appropriately young and forthright, if perhaps too smooth-edged for a working-class north Englander. Maggie Markham and Sarah Whelan are fine as the girls, withering and winsome at once.

Grace Georgiadis brings an interesting prickliness to Wellesley-bred interviewer Emily — about whose Boston neighbors, blamed for their IRA sympathies and support, Dave has nothing good to say. And the excellent Maureen Keiller mixes sass, cynicism and pain into an older woman who comes late to the party, only to lounge provocatively at its center.

But that is as much of the plot as you are getting out of me because the settling — or unsettling — of old scores remains up in some pretty charged air until the end. The point is that neither history nor guilt can be shaken hands with and put behind us. And while they say revenge is a dish best served cold, it's actually pretty indigestible.

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Grace Georgiadis as Emily and Barlow Adamson as Dave in "The Honey Trap." (Courtesy Kalman Zabarsky/Boston Playwrights' Theatre)