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'The Weir' at San Jose Repertory Theater

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A man walks into a pub ...
One by one, thr ee men enter a small, dilapidated pub in rural Ireland: they are Jack (Robert Sicular), a contentious old "bollocks" who owns the local garage; Brendan (Alex Moggridge), the affable young barkeep; and Jim (Mark Anderson Phillips), a taciturn and inhibited handyman with a taste for "small ones," or shots of whisky. Their conversation moves from the freezing weather with its icy wind that "will cut you" to how to win a horse race, "he's learning to listen," to the hottest gossip of all: Finbar, the local realtor, has just rented the passed-on Moira Neelan's house to a young, apparently single woman, and he's bringing her to the pub that evening for a bit of local color.

Thus opens *The Weir*, the award-winning play by Irish playwright Conor McPherson now playing at the San Jose Repertory Theatre; its excellent cast creating perceptive studies of the characters, whose personalities and engaging stories—told with mostly convincing accents (Zillah Glory struggles to find Irish cadences, though her acting is excellent)—rather than plot, compel the play's momentum.

Long silences ensue as the men contemplate the possibilities of this new arrival. Their loneliness is palpable, and their inability to address the sorrow of their loneliness comical. But the intrinsic dignity of their individual struggles elicits an immediate and ironic sympathy. When Finbar (Andy Murray), finally appears with Valerie (Zillah Glory), an attractive young Dubliner, whose motivations for leaving Dublin for the remoteness and quiet of her new home remain an unposed question throughout most of the play, Jack rises to challenge of the ever-so-much-more-successful married and financially secure Finbar. He begins storytelling.

and with him walks his past ...
And he tells a ghost story grandly, in legendary Irish style, with dramatic pauses and persistent sound effects, delighting in the telling and with an evident glee in his ability to captivate his audience—his mates and the charming Valerie, overlapped with the silent audience sitting in the darkness on the other side of the stage. Finbar protests, "You're making heavy weather of this yarn!" but he's just as willing to launch into his own ghost tale, which is less about a ghost than his own feverish imagination as a young man—a "header" or head-banging nutter, as he calls himself.

It's the reluctant Jim's odd and disturbing story that is the turning point of the play. When he tells the story of the man he's digging the grave of—a ghostly pedophile who wants to be buried in the grave of a young girl—he paths the way for Valerie's story. The men are disgusted by Jim's story, which they find inappropriate for Valerie's delicate female ears—but it allows Valerie to tell about her own ghost, which is the only story of the evening that borders on true despair, and which confounds the listeners, leaving them horrified and immediately enlisting her as a comrade among their own hapless lives of lost souls.

The weir, a local dam pointed out among the photos on the pub's wall, is an apt metaphor for these pent-up sorrows that gather behind the characters' silences and swaggering storytelling. The play is a precisely and poetically written series of subtle encounters, neither overly dramatic nor pitched toward a building disaster of cathartic events but a quiet and compelling retelling of very human isolation, fears and sorrows. An excellent choice and finely directed by Rick Lombardo.

—Jaime Robles
Conor McPherson's *The Weir* continues at the San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo De San Antonio Walk, San Jose, through February 21. For tickets and information, call (408) 367-7255 or visit www.sjrep.com.
Photo: Jack (Robert Sicular) and Jim (Mark Anderson Phillips) share a joke at the pub; Brendan (Alex Moggridge) looks on.