

'The Weir' is San Jose Repertory's intoxicating, entertaining Irish fairy tale

By [Karen D'Souza](#)

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Posted: 01/30/2010 03:35:10 PM PST

Updated: 01/31/2010 04:35:53 AM PST

The supernatural reigns supreme in the realm of Conor McPherson.

From "The Seafarer" to "Shining City," he has spun yarns of ghouls and goblins. Some of his lost souls are tormented by loss and grief. Others raise their glasses to ward off such demons. In "The Weir," now at San Jose Repertory Theatre, the characters find themselves bedeviled by more than one kind of spirit.

Steeped in the atmosphere of the Irish pub, "The Weir" casts a Gothic spell on the audience from the first toast to the last call.

If the Rep production takes a few beats before it finds its cadence, there's no denying the play's eerie intensity.

A celebration of the art of the storyteller, ably directed by Rick Lombardo, "The Weir" retains its power to mesmerize.

Shudders of fear rub elbows with frissons of comedy in this spellbinder.

One of the most gifted playwrights to come out of Ireland in recent years, McPherson entices us with the magic of the village pub.

He distills the peculiar camaraderie of the lonely and the soused in his tart banter.

Pub amid the gloom

In this damp patch of bog far out in the country, winter means darkness, stillness and grim, ungodly quiet.

The only way to pierce the gloom is to nip into the pub for a quick pint (or 12).

As the wind howls outside, a couple of barflies are hoisting back the hooch. Garrulous old Jack (Robert Sicular), who lives alone and runs a garage, and hapless Jimmy (Mark Anderson Phillips), who tends to his ailing mum, trade gossip with taciturn bartender Brendan (Alex Moggridge).

This is a temple to Guinness where Harp is exotic and white wine unheard of, and it's usually all blokes.

Until one day, the local bigwig Finbar (Andy Murray) waltzes into the bar with a pretty young woman on his arm.

Her name is Valerie (Zillah Glory). She's new to town, strangely quiet and all too willing to lend an ear as the lads engage in their favorite pastime.

This is storytelling as a competitive sport.

One after the other, the boys joust for Valerie's ears. Once they learn she has moved into an old house with a spooky past, they bombard her with tales of the ghosts and fairies of local lore.

The stories are subtle and understated, but McPherson makes every bump in the night bewitching.

Each tale is an aria of fear and foreboding that not only raises the hairs on the back of the neck, it also urges us to reflect on the transience of all things, including us.

Intimations of mortality echo throughout this haunting play as McPherson uses the ghost stories to frame his musings

about the nature of life.

Potent silences

Phillips (last seen here in "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde") beautifully evokes that existential subtext with his monologue about the night he dug a grave in the pelting rain only to encounter a strange figure looming amid the headstones.

He depicts the ne'er-do-well Jimmy with such a richly idiosyncratic set of tics and habits (he sits in a crouch and blinks when he's nervous) that the actor seems to disappear entirely into the character.

Sicular also rivets as his grizzled character confesses that the most horrifying thing he has ever grappled with was not a ghost but the specter of regret.

Not all of the performances feels quite as lived-in, which undercuts the mounting suspense.

McPherson glories in the art of the pause, the quiet that pricks up our ears for what comes next.

His silences are as potent as his language is richly musical.

But the emotional stakes need to be higher for those silences to have their full impact.

Finally, after all the chaps have had their say, Valerie tells a story of her own — and it's a doozy. Glory misses Valerie's sense of mystery, the hint that she may be keeping a secret all along.

She also rushes her climactic monologue.

But she movingly taps into the abyss of heartache and confusion that drive this character to that bar stool on that winter's night. There she finds a way to beat back the darkness.

Contact Karen D'Souza at 408-271-3772. Check out her stories at www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza.

"The Weir"

By Conor McPherson

Upshot: In this intoxicating Irish fairy tale, a circle of barflies is haunted by more than one kind of spirit.

Where: San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose

Through: Feb. 21

Running time:

1 hour, 50 minutes

(no intermission)

Tickets: \$17.50-\$74; 408-367-7255,

www.sjrep.com