

## **MILO'S WAKE - Reviews**

NOTE: ALL reviews of MILO'S WAKE included; ALL reviews complete and unedited.

### **2006**

#### **NZ Listener**

July 15-21 2006 – Dogs Bollix Bar, Auckland

Natasha Hay

Many of the audience at the Dogs Bollix pub can reach out and touch the four actors in Milo's Wake, where we're part of the action as guests at a wake.

For first-generation Kiwi, Irishman Milo O'Connor, one of the sadness's of life is that people only say good things when you're dead. Determined this won't happen to him, he holds his own wake in a pub, complete with coffin and live music, to give family and friends the opportunity to raise a jar and sing his praises. Yet what begins as a rousing mixture of singing and speeches spirals out of control, as the gathering dredges dark moments from the past.

Milo is a crazy whirlwind of Celtic energy, an initially charismatic bloke with well-honed blarney. Then more unpleasant aspects of him emerge, driven out by grief. It's a wonderfully layered performance by Peter Feeney, who brings out the joy and vitriol. Both Feeney and Peta Rutter, as his long-suffering but feisty wife Maura, manage to portray their characters without lapsing into cliché.

Although the play's early emphasis is on comedy, centering on Milo's pigheaded oafishness, the tone of the second half is different, as the action veers towards devastating revelations and an examination of family relationships when he repeatedly tells his wife to shut up and needles his son (Ashley Hawkes) and son's girlfriend (Hannah Marshall). The mix of farce, tragedy and Irish song is a brave one that the cast pull off splendidly. It's funny, honest and moving, full of great music, sparkling repartee and terrific performances from the cast and live Irish band, the Wren Buys.

#### **Otago Daily Times**

23 August 2006 – Fortune Theatre, Dunedin

Clarke Isaacs

#### **FEENEY MAGNIFICENT AS MAUDLIN MILO**

Who but an Irishman would think of holding his own wake, giving him the chance to laud himself in the midst of relatives, friends and hangers-on?

That's what Milo Joseph O'Connor does in Michael and Margery Forde's Milo's Wake, which opened its Dunedin season to a rapt audience which virtually filled the Fortune Studio Theatre last night.

The play begins with O'Connor (Peter Feeney), a braw broth of a man, raising himself from his coffin, and then for the rest of the night dominating proceedings with a plethora of candid observations about those nearest and dearest to him, as well as others deserving in his mind of a harsh tongue-licking.

O'Connor has emigrated from Ireland to New Zealand and, for the purposes of local consumption, made his way to Dunedin.

A hard man, used to hard work, he has built up a business selling cladding, together with his wife, Maura (Peta Rutter), the brains of the enterprise. A cunning operator, the irreverent Milo has not been above casually displaying a rosary to clinch a sale with a devout Catholic.

But, wake under way, Milo springs a surprise: he bequeaths his business to son Ned (Ashley Hawkes), and announces that he will up stakes to roam with Maura in his newly-acquired motor-home.

This play has its humorous moments, but for the most part it is hard tack, a certain pathos suffusing the harsh strictures emanating from Milo and his recollections of past events which have moulded his life.

Feeney turns in a magnificent performance as the tortured soul who is Milo, investing the part with an athletic exuberance which quite rightly demands the succour of the plenteous quaffing of liquor that his strictures demand throughout the play.

As Milo's put-upon, dignified wife, Peta Rutter projects a fine aura of calmness.

Son Ned, valiantly suffering the verbal shafts and arrows which spring from his father's lips, plays the role well, and Hannah Marshall, as his girlfriend Brooke, injects considerable spirit when the dialogue so demands.

The audience is very much part of Milo's wake, and he is not slow to assure them of his interest in their sharing remembrances of his life.

The Wren Buoys Band (Jo Taylor and Francis Hunt), with a collection of appropriate instruments, ably supplement the Irishness of the piece with their often plangent musicianship.

Peter Feeney also directs this quirky, anarchic drama, which runs till Sunday.

### **Timaru Herald**

**23 August 2006. Landing Services Building, Timaru**

**Esther Ashby-Coventry**

#### **QUALITY PERFORMANCE**

With no fancy lighting, changing scenery or high tech sound system *Milo's Wake* was left to the raw natural talent of the cast and a sometimes hilarious script to succeed in the wonderfully intimate theatre of the Landing Services Building last Thursday.

An exuberant performance by Peter Feeney as Milo O'Connor the spirited Irish patriarch and excellent support from his wife Maura played by Peta Rutter created a fabulous foundation.

Milo gathers his family and friends for his own wake, and an end to an old working life and the start of a new retirement. But instead of the expected rousing eulogies and anticipated party, boiling emotions let rip.

As past resentments and unresolved family issues are gradually aired in-between enchanting Irish tales and humour, gifted musicians Jo Taylor and Francis Hunt added harmonious Celtic sounds as punctuation.

Son Ned (Ashley Hawkes) and girlfriend Brooke (Hannah Marshall) showed how professional thespians stay focused and not once did either drop out of character.

The audience was the congregation at the wake and rode the rollercoaster of emotions, pathos, denials and laughter along with the characters.

It was a rewarding experience in a great venue.

*Milo's Wake* was co-written by Michael and Margery Forde and has won the prestigious NSW Premier's Award for best stage play, the Matilda Award, the Perform 4MBS award and was nominated for the Augie in 2001.

Timaru had not originally been on the Feeney McSweeney production's itinerary but here's hoping this will be the start of many more quality performances like *Milo's Wake* stopping by.

## **Waikato Times**

3 July 2006

What: Milo's Wake

Where: Meteor Theatre

Reviewed by: Justine Turner

Milo's reasoning behind hosting his own wake before he died seemed logical - a shame people wait until you "kark it" before they say something nice about you.

But bring out the family skeletons and a few dramas, and Milo's Wake takes on a new form. From popping out of his casket, candid singing and dancing, to learning of his son's impending marriage and dealing with the loss of another son, Milo's Wake had me in fits of laughter and tears.

I was nervous to see audience participation was a big part, as it often breaks the flow of a play, but in Milo's Wake it seemed fitting and was done so naturally.

We were part of the wake - we were offered food, we helped, and more suitably, we got to sing along. Peter Feeney (Cold Feet, Hercules, Xena) as Milo was brilliant. His passion and power as the head of the house were gripping.

And Maura his Catholic wife, played by Peta Rutter, was just as provoking. Their chemistry and abilities were real and successful.

Ashley Hawkes played their son, and his intimate and natural performance was also well done. His girlfriend Brooke, played by Hannah Marshall, rounded out the cast. She added a light, yet surprisingly intense feel to the wake, and surprised with an amazing singing voice.

Throughout the play, musicians The Wren Buoys added flavour to morbid and dramatic scenes, and laughter and fun to up-beat parts.

Milo's Wake was refreshing look into a family's life at an unexpected location.

It was a wonderful, cleverly written and well-acted piece of New Zealand theatre.

## **Theatre View (1)**

30 August 2006 – Fortune Theatre, Dunedin

Terry MacTavish

### **INFECTIOUS JOLLITY, SPELLBINDING TRAGEDY**

Once I had a golden-haired Irish friend who had married her childhood sweetheart. When I asked her, in the feminist 70s, why, though charming, he regarded her life as completely subordinate to his, and never lifted a finger to help her, she would shrug, "He's Irish." As if that answered all. And perhaps it does. But it still exasperates me as I realise I am about to type "long-suffering wife" yet again. It's a fine line between classic and cliché.

For this play is all about Irish immigrant made good, Milo O'Connor, bursting with hubris, riding roughshod over his family as he makes the age-old journey to cathartic self-realisation. He is holding his own wake (though I bet it was the wife who prepared the repast), ostensibly to hear the tributes normally paid to a corpse, but also to announce his retirement. Inevitably and inexorably his tragic secret is revealed, and through the loving strength of said long-suffering wife, Milo faces himself and his redemption can begin.

There's no denying the Irish know how to party, and it would be a churlish theatre-goer who was not swept up in the buoyant mood created from the moment Milo pops out of his coffin, complete with booze and travel-pillow. The Dunedin audience certainly found him irresistible.

*Milo's Wake* is usually performed in a pub, which would provide, as well as mandatory Guinness, the perfect ambience for a play that requires the audience to join in singing sentimental Irish songs. Dicey O'Reilly's would surely have welcomed this rollicking show, but the Hutchinson Studio makes a good

understudy, thanks to the energy of the actors and on-stage presence of the wonderful Wren Buoy. For of course, we were the guests at Milo's wake. Drinks were offered round, spurious "friends" were greeted noisily, and it didn't seem too embarrassing to bellow, "Come on, Eileen!" with the rest.

There are pitfalls to involving your audience, however: it can be hard to shut them up when the atmosphere darkens. On the night I went, during a most poignant pause, an over-enthusiastic patron yelled, "Just leave him!" and when Milo tried to get us keening, some responded with a repeat chorus of "For he's a jolly good fellow". A few beads short of a rosary, indeed.

The actors were up to the challenge though; the potentially awkward change of tone was carried off confidently, and the audience that had initially been hooked by jokes and infectious jollity were eventually spellbound by unfolding tragedy.

Peter Feeney as Milo displays all the infuriating charismatic charm of the wild Irish boyo. The role demands extraordinary energy and commitment, and Feeney gives it his all, leaping manically around the stage, roaring into song, sentiment or abuse, and re-engaging us with vulnerability after sickening us with cruelty.

Peta Rutter makes of the long-suffering one far more than a doormat. She gives Maura Eileen a quiet strength and watchful compassion that becomes intensely touching, and she too has her moments of glad revelry. Her dancing in particular is a delight. Perhaps one day someone will write Maura's story.

Ned, the Kiwi son, played by Ashley Hawkes, initially appears somewhat wet in comparison with his charismatic father, but succeeds in capturing our sympathy, while his very engaging fiancé Brooke (chrysanthemum-haired Hannah Marshall) charmed with no apparent effort at all. She has a mean right-hook too.

The success of the evening, though, was ensured for me by the magic of the musicians, Jo Taylor and Francis Hunt, with their fascinating range of traditional instruments. I liked also the amusement and gentle sincerity with which they watched the story unfold.

The cast liked us too. "You were afraid there'd be a bunch of boring old farts here, but look, the place is packed with crazy funsters!" Bet they don't say that to all the audiences.

## **Theatre View (2)**

**25 July 2006 – Dogs Bollix Bar, Auckland**

**Nik Smythe**

### **'CORPSE' GENERATES MIRTH AND EXHUMES DEMONS**

If you don't normally read play reviews, maybe find them over wordy and a bit of a wank, then perhaps you won't read all of this. But **do** go and see *Milo's Wake*, you'll love it. Thought I should mention that first off.

In the words of co-playwright Margery Forde: "Plays are not written in isolation. They are a blueprint for a hopefully living, breathing three dimensional event involving a whole barrage of people - directors, designers, actors, musicians, stage management and so on." Strangely, though, she hasn't mentioned the audience.

Everyone at Milo's wake is in *Milo's Wake*, and tracking the unfolding story in Milo's wake (it might make more sense after a coupla Guinnesses!) We're old family friends, distant relatives and folks who've had their home cladding done by that unforgettable old paddy, Milo O'Connor. And here we all are at our favourite local, to pay our final respects to the man at this most unique of wakes; unique in that Milo isn't dead yet ...Or is he? I don't mean to imply that there is any supernatural intrigue here (eerie and enchanting tales of faeries and changelings and dancing leprechauns notwithstanding), but the more serious questions raised during this hilarious function include matters of integrity, morality and quality of life.

Milo (Peter Feeney) is throwing himself a premature wake in the hope that he may hear a kind word

said about him from this side of the grave. And he'll be the first to tell you the myriad accomplishments he has achieved to earn them.

Irish must certainly be in the top five most effective cultures at wearing one's heart on one sleeve. *Milo's Wake* is here and now, warts and all, plus a few old (and young) skeletons in the closet just waiting to be brought out to show to the guests. For the supposed deceased one, Milo is the life of the party: "...if you've heard this one before, don't stop me 'cause I'd like to hear it again." He throws his weight around on everyone with classic brutish charm, and half the time they (we) love him for it.

The quintessential better half, Milo's dear wife Maura, is beautifully portrayed by Peta Rutter with wry long-suffering wit underscored with Celtic passion and kiwi melancholy. Anyone would feel lucky to have Maura for a relative, she's all faith and principles and, above all, love. Clearly the backbone of sanity in the family.

Enter their son Ned (Ashley Hawkes), eldest of two (sadly his younger brother Aidan has since passed on). Hawkes' authentically awkward turn delivers a striking contrast to the cultural Irish personality (Ned was born here). Loyal to his family, he's typically standoffish but doesn't take too much prodding to rise to the occasion. He's brought his girlfriend, classy (but down to earth) publicist Brooke (Hannah Marshall), and they have a little announcement of their own to make...

As for the music, the Wren Buys - Jo and Francis (Jo Taylor and Francis Hunt) - are simply grand, rolling out barrels of Irish music old and very old, with soulfulness and skill, using the gamut of traditional instruments. Of course the production would have been noticeably lacking without the traditional Irish musicians at the traditional Irish wake. Even so, there's something about a live score that helps me to absorb myself into a piece of theatre more fully. Taylor's voice in particular, already famous in the Dog's Bollix, is most welcome in this sidesplittingly sombre event.

Acknowledgment is also due to Sally Woodfield, producer, and special mention must also go to Conor McSweeney, for three reasons: 1) he co-founded the Dog's Bollix, 2) he co-founded Feeney McSweeney (with Feeney) to launch the original run of Milo's wake in 2005, and 3) he coached Feeney and Rutter on their Irish accents, which are totally convincing.

Teaming an Irish pub up with a professional Auckland theatre production is the cleverest cross-cultural match since Metallica got a classical orchestra for a backing band. Ultimately, everything in *Milo's Wake* is very much alive, from the people to their demons to the stories and songs. As a guest I was honoured to be a natural part of it - I didn't know him personally, but I could almost recall him doin' me claddin'.

There's so much I'd love to rave on about but it's one of those ones where it might spoil it a bit if I give away too much story. This colourful family is really best revealed in their own way, so like I said at the start, just go.

## 2005

### NZ Herald

20 April 2005- Dogs Bollix Bar, Auckland

Shannon Huse

Four thespians go into a bar ... it sounds like the start of an Irish pub joke but it is a fair, although not very enlightening, description of Auckland's newest theatre production.

There is no need for suspension of disbelief when you are watching Milo's Wake at the Dog's Bollix. The characters walk in and out the front door of the pub around the audience. You are a guest at a wake so they offer you drink and food. The Irish trio, the Wren Buoys Band, entertain with drums and pipes, and when Milo talks about the big Kea camper van parked outside, there it is on the curb.

It's refreshing to be right in the action rather than separated by the normal theatre set-up. It helps bring this kitchen sink drama alive by reinforcing the feeling that you have been unwittingly caught up in a family stoush and are hearing conversations you shouldn't.

Milo's Wake was written four years ago by Australian husband and wife team Mike and Margery Forde. It tells the story of Milo O'Connor and his decision to hold a wake before he dies so he can hear all the nice things people have to say about him. But with plenty of skeletons in the family closet he is sorely disappointed.

In the wrong hands the in-the-round staging of Milo's Wake could have been excruciating, like one of those dreadful dinner theatre shows where supercilious actors embarrass and insult the paying guests while impersonating characters from much-loved television shows.

Instead it's a rollicking production that wears its heart on its sleeve. Audience members are treated with good humour and respect and it's the actors who have nowhere to hide.

Actor-director Peter Feeney is charismatic as Milo, holding the audience's attention from the moment he gets out of his coffin. He is lovable and contemptible at the same time but all the way we are rooting for his redemption.

He is well-supported by Susan Brady, who plays his wife Maura with just the right amount of Catholic conservatism and passion. She also has a lovely clear singing voice.

Ashley Hawkes is well cast as Milo and Maura's son Ned and his sensitive portrayal of a youth finding the strength to become a man caused many a tear. Rounding out the cast is Hannah Marshall in her first professional role and her wide-eyed idealism is perfect for girlfriend Brooke.

Peter Feeney wants his new company, Feeney McSweeney, to make theatre more accessible and less of "a middle-class entertainment". The old timers enjoying a half-time ciggie outside were won over and keen to make sure that us young lassies were "getting it all". A sure sign that Feeney is on his way. So, Slainte, and let's have another jar.

### Varsity.co.nz

18 April 2005 - Dogs Bollix Bar, Auckland

Written by Imogen

#### **BRINGING IT TO THE TABLE**

I have been sitting here trying to formulate the correct way to write this review. I have been looking for a fluid formula that will flow effortlessly from introduction to scene setter to concluding remarks. The mind maps that I have made all became demented basketballs for me to pot-shot into the bin. I've made a few too many trips to the pantry looking for little titbits of distracting motivations discovering in the process that we don't need to buy any more pasta sauce, ever.

So, I have decided honesty, as ineloquent as it may be, is the best way to proceed.

*Milo's Wake*, the comedy-slash-performance piece being held at Auckland's iconic Irish pub the Dog's Bollix, is brilliant. No, not just brilliant, that's not fair. It achieves too much to be simply brilliant; haircuts and sly jokes are brilliant, a lift home and good toast is brilliant, a perfect morning coffee is brilliant. As good as those things are, *Milo's Wake* stays with you far longer than fond memories of the perfect piece of toast.

The premise of the plot is that Milo (Peter Feeney), a charmingly cantankerous Irish immigrant, decides that he doesn't want to wait until he's dead and gone before he celebrates his life. He is going to have his wake now while he is alive and able to witness all the grand things he expects people will have to say about him. His family, a band (the Wren Buoys) and the guests (that's you) have all been given their invitations. All that waits is the big day.

People usually recoil from participatory theatre. "Don't pull me up on stage!" they decry, "You're the actor, you do the acting and I'll do the watching" they insist. The very idea of the actors getting off the stage, indeed not really having a stage, not even having a fourth wall or a sumptuous deep red curtain that locks the world on the stage away in 'make believe land' is certainly not everyone's ideas of a guaranteed good night out.

But perhaps the hesitant should know that if they go to *Milo's Wake* they get to drink, eat (for free when Milo's wife, played by Susan Brady, hands around bagellets), sing, cry, laugh and make witty contributions when they choose to. No one is going to make them do anything.

The hesitant may also find themselves quite surprised at what they do chose to do because it's very hard to sit there, the carnivalesque music resonating under your seat, your cashew nuts skipping in time with Milo's thumping, burning love-hate emotions being spun around the room and stay removed, passive and inert.

Peter Feeney's compelling portrayal of Milo's internal fight against life's nonsensical and ruthless nature is stirring. He commands the room, spinning, dancing, fighting and strutting with an arrogant schoolboy swing, the randomness an absorbing externalisation of his violent internal fight against confronting loss and heartache.

His character is grounded by his wife's wicked but unyielding compassion for her husband's plight. Warmth that Susan manages to capture in snappy sideway glances, raised eyebrows, quaffs to herself and the ability to stare of into the distance and actually look for all the world like she is actually staring off into the distance. In the performances program Susan notes that she seems to have become type cast as a mum, I would suggest to her that if she wants to escape that type cast she should stop pulling it off so bloody well.

Completing the official family is their son Ned (Ashley Hawkes) and his girlfriend Brooke (Hannah Marshall). Ned is an awkwardly staunch twenty something torn between supporting his girlfriend, abiding by his father's wishes and acting like the grown man his father now expects him to be. The role is perfectly suited to Ashley who himself is an awkwardly staunch twenty something who dedicates *Milo's Wake*, his first professional appearance, to his father.

Other than having a head of fabulous tight curls and a singing voice that I am intensely envious of, Hannah's girlfriend/damaged soul (but positively future focused) performance is gold. For a woman who is currently completing a double major at the University of Auckland and who doesn't have years of acting school experience, she bears testimony to the power of being driven by conviction and practice rather than endless official processes of progress.

The accents, often the final hurdle for performances to clear before they can be deemed successful, pass without notice. That's how good they are. Indeed it wasn't until I sat down and thought through the show, taking it to parts, that I even got around to thinking about accents.

Concluding remark? I tried to write something objective and detached but I failed. I couldn't shake the memories of the thrills I got as I sat at my pub bench, drink in hand, cashews out in front with grand Irish music all around and thought "damned if I don't want a wake just like this one".