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IT'S
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STARTS ON PAGE 24



IT'S COME OF AGE

A powerful adaptation
of the Maeve Binchy
classic, **Circle of Friends**

FIRST REVIEW - PAGE 26



by **Linda Maher**

Circle of Friends
Gaiety Theatre, Dublin until
May 14

Verdict: Maeve would be proud
★★★★☆

IT'S almost 30 years since I first read *Circle of Friends*, the beautiful coming-of-age novel by Maeve Binchy. I fell in love with it instantly, then in 1995, I raced to the cinema to see the film version on the day of its release.

The latter, though glossy and slick, lacked the wonderful warmth of the book — and don't get me started on viewers being expected to accept Minnie Driver as overweight and unattractive.

What was missing was Maeve's sympathetic storytelling, her innate ability to give her characters real depth and allow to reader to empathise with them.

Her biting, bang-on critique of the rural/urban divide was at the heart of so much of her work, but the bright lights of Hollywood dimmed this insight somewhat, making it feel twee and unrealistic.

I feared similar would happen with the stage version — but I needn't have worried.

Adapted by Elaine Murphy, the story stays true to the book but, more importantly, you can sense Maeve's influence throughout.

If you're unfamiliar with the story — or if, like me, the memory of it has faded with time — it's centred on Benny Hogan, a big-hearted and big-bodied woman from the fictional town of Knockglen, who is off to university in Dublin.

Alongside her lifelong friend Eve Malone — orphaned as a youngster and raised by nuns — they head to the bright lights and big city, where they meet handsome Jack Foley, goofy Aidan Lynch and beautiful Nan Mahon.

The five strike up a firm friendship, with Benny more than surprised that Jack should take an interest in her, rather than the many good-looking women throwing themselves at him.

Their relationship is hampered somewhat by the fact that Benny has to get a bus home every evening and spend weekends in

Full circle as love story returns home



Firm friends: (l-r) Roseanna Purcell, Fionn Foley, Juliette Crosbie, Aisling Kearns and Shane O'Regan
Pix: Ste Murray



Country couple: Susannah De Wrixon and Mark O'Regan

Knockglen too to help out in the family business. There, her father's creepy assistant Sean has notions

that he can somehow weasel his way into her affections.

Benny's inability to go to parties or on proper dates causes frustration for Jack, who as a doctor's son studying medicine and a rugby player, is used to getting what he wants. They make it work, however, until tragedy strikes Benny's family.

The side story of Nan setting her gaze on an unsuitable wealthy man and the devastating fallout from their relationship is also explored.

The two events combine to cause

a deep rift between the five pals — can their friendship survive?

The cast are wonderfully selected with Roseanna Purcell and Aisling Kearns brilliant as Benny and Eve — though again, don't get me started on Roseanna being thought of as overweight in any sense. The duo grasp perfectly the naiveté and innocence of country girls moving to 1950s Dublin.

Jack Hickey and Shane O'Regan give a perfect portrayal as Jack and Aidan respectively, with the latter providing perfectly-timed comic relief throughout.

Special mention has to go to

Marcus Lamb as the creepy Sean — his very arrival on stage evoked groans of disgust from the audience. There's no higher praise.

Mark O'Regan and Susannah De Wrixon are excellent as Benny's parents, with Mark in particular embodying the country dad who's immensely proud of his daughter but also unwilling to see her grow up.

Maeve Binchy was such an icon of Irish writing that it's a big step to take on the adaptation of any of her stories. It's a step worth taking, however, as this heart-warming production proves.