

**MICHAEL MOFFATT**  
SHOW OF THE WEEK

**Circle Of Friends**

Gaiety Theatre  
Until May 14 ★★★★★

I must admit that I'm not a great fan of Maeve Binchy's novels. Admittedly, they're unpretentious, have recognisable characters and good plots, gentle humour and reflections on religious and social behaviour. But they're often vastly overwritten with acres of disposable detail, in a style that's relaxed but not particularly memorable.

In a way that may account for the popularity of the novels. They cover a broad field, raise some serious issues but not enough to cause much discomfort. So in ways they're very suitable for transfer to the stage, where the overdose of words is cut to a minimum, laying bare the characters and the story.

There are more than 70,000 words in the novel *Circle Of Friends*. In a programme note, adaptor Elaine Murphy, queries how to wreduce it to a two-hour

**'Conversation limited with a lot of bawdy humour and lack of voice projection'**

play. The answer? Cut out the volumes of unnecessary stuff. The result is a bit of a mix, but overall an entertaining production.

The first half is mostly concerned with the departure of the three leading female characters from home and their arrival at UCD in the 1950s, ready for study, romance and a new atmosphere.

There's flirty, attractive Nan from a working-class home, who has a sexual eye on the main chance; overweight, likeable Benny (Bernadette), getting away from her over-protective parents in a rural town near Dublin, and the assertive Eve, brought up in a convent because her birth broke the rules of her Protestant and Catholic background.

The episodic structure of the play, with well-managed quick scene changes, makes it possibly more suitable for television than the stage. The one unchanging piece is a huge iron-style backdrop with the letters UCD engraved on it, hardly the Earlsfort Terrace of the Fifties.

The first half is full of the girls initiation rites into UCD, meeting three young men and endlessly

# FEMALE TRIO LET DOWN BY THEIR LEADING MEN

**DOESN'T END WELL:**  
*Circle Of Friends* at the Gaiety

Diverting but slightly static adaptation of Maeve Binchy's coming-of-age novel



**DEPARTURE:**  
Eve, Nan and Benny are ready for change

talking about sexual possibilities and dangers. Nan knows all the ropes and ruses; Eve clings to just one male, Aidan, and Benny is overwhelmed by the surprising attentions of the dashing rugby hero Jack.

Their conversation is decid-

edly limited with a lot of bawdy humour between them but it was taken too fast at times and some of the dialogue was thrown away by lack of voice projection. But in general, Roseanna Purcell (Benny), Juliette Crosbie (Nan) and Aisling Kearns (Eve) made an attractive contrasting trio.

However, Jack Hickey as the rugby idol medical student, Jack, showed none of the charismatic personality one would expect from someone the girls apparently swoon over, and his mate Aidan (Shane O'Regan) seems unsure

**'Manipulative and creepy, he changes the atmosphere any time he's on stage'**

of whether his role should be romantic, gormless or ridiculous.

Seán Walsh, manipulative manager of the shop run by Benny's father, creepily played by Marcus Lamb, is a Uriah Heep-style character who changes the

atmosphere every time he comes on stage.

The dramatic element is much stronger in the second half, giving Lamb some excellent scenes. And Mark O'Regan and Susannah De Wrixon as shopkeepers Mr and Mrs Hogan, are polished scene stealers when they get the chance.

The dramatic centre of the play is Nan's predicament, that involves betrayal by both Jack and the local resident of the Anglo-Irish Big House (David Crowley). But the drama element eventually slides into an unsatisfying ending.

The pace is generally good, but direction by Viko Nikci often gives the production a static look with characters just standing waiting for their turn to speak without any sense of choreographed movement.