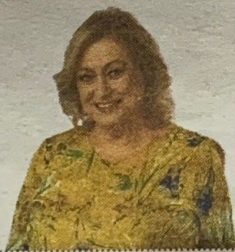




Drama queens - Juliette Crosbie, Roseanna Purcell and Aisling Kearns in 'Circle of friends'

## Binchy's sisterhood gets a touching outing on stage

**EMER O'KELLY**



**CIRCLE OF FRIENDS**  
Gaiety Theatre  
**FRANKENSTEIN: HOW TO MAKE A MONSTER**  
Gate Theatre

**T**he cast of *Circle of Friends* were going into rehearsal when Covid first struck. Booking had already opened.

Now, more than two years later, Maeve Binchy's devoted fans, presumably in their thousands, will be able to see the circle rising like a phoenix on the stage of the Gaiety Theatre.

The worldwide bestseller has been adapted for the stage by Elaine Murphy, and from the audience reaction on opening night, she has done an entirely satisfying job.

Certainly the story of three giddy girls who meet on their first day at university in the late 1950s, skates along with a kind of wide-eyed innocence that is extremely touching, with all coming right, more or less, at the end. There have been difficulties along the way, including a faithless boyfriend and an unwanted pregnancy, but it's 80pc of a happy ending.

And that's realistic enough to be acceptable, with a limited bit of deserved misery being doled out to the wrongdoers. Although, coming fresh to the plot, I found myself blinking a bit at the description of the women as "friends" given certain betrayals along the way.

As a play, it has its limits if

you haven't read the book, with backstories pretty well non-existent, so there is little context, and the maelstrom of small-town social politics unexplained in its tuppence ha'penny looking down on tuppence genre. But Binchy fans aren't looking for Tolstoy.

It takes a while to settle under Viko Nikci's direction, and there's a certain amount of unevenness in the playing, but Roseanna Purcell as Benny, Aisling Kearns as Eve and Juliette Crosbie as Nan are genuinely convincing and there are particularly stand-out performances from Marcus Lamb as the sleazy Sean Walsh, Shane O'Regan as the gormless Aidan Lynch and Susannah DeWrixon as Mrs Hogan.

There's an impressively adaptable moving set by Kate Moylan lit by Kevin McFadden, with sound by Denis Clohessy and choreography by Belinda Murphy.

**When Frankenstein begins** with a staged argument between the theatre's front of house manager and the show's on-stage director concerning the use of mobile phones (usually forbidden in the theatre, but this time it's demanded that the audience can film the performance at will), and there follows an apparently puerile warm-up with the same director dividing the audience into two to compete at producing drum-like sounds, my expectations of this production drop to "glum".

But how wrong can you be? Battersea Arts Centre's Beatbox Academy turns everything theatrical on its head. Its members/performers are all part of the "alienated generation," and grab *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley's sci-fi novel (and she was only 20 when it was published in 1818) to

make it a vehicle for self-expression in today's technological world. They've devised a loud, manic 70-minute examination of our techie world and its dangerous downside for those who can't, or don't want to conform.

Central to the theme is the poor Monster, the outsider who can't find acceptance of his difference. In fact, it is the world and its pointing fingers that make him a monster.

And it's all done with the human voice and the human body: six of them, each turning the tables on expectations of mayhem with an ensemble of vocal gymnastics, hip-hop, rap, acrobatics, and plain ordinary singing and dancing of dazzling inventiveness and talent as disciplined as anything on a barracks square...or in a corps de ballet. The corporate discipline is almost wondrous, and it's almost impossible to accept that there are no instruments hidden around, so perfect is the soundscape achieved by six tongues clicking off six larynxes.

The idea, according to co-directors Conrad Murray and David Cumming, was to show "outsider kids" that they did belong in the world of the performing arts. They've been doing it for 10 years in Battersea, and *Frankenstein: How to Make a Monster*, is the result.

The best ideas are the simplest ones, it seems, and the performers, Alex Hackett, Nadine Rose Johnson, Aminita Francis, Nathaniel Forder-Staple, Aziza Amira Brown, and Tyler Worthington are quite simply breathtaking.

*'Circle of Friends' is a Breda Cashe production, and runs until May 14*

*'Frankenstein: How to Make a Monster' runs until Saturday, April 30*