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## **WEB EXCLUSIVE! From These Green Heights Review\_UWM Main Stage Theatre**

By Russ Bickerstaff

At some point late last year, the UWM Department of Theatre somewhat casually announced that it would be launching the North American premiere of an acclaimed Irish play from a couple of years ago. One of the least-hyped shows to open in Milwaukee this season, Dermot Bolger's compelling "From These Green Heights" is easily the biggest surprise of '05-'06. It's a powerful, visually dazzling drama about dream and loss under the overwhelming oppression of poverty.

Bolger's story concerns the lives of two North Dublin families living in Ballymun Towers. A massive, Cabrini Green-like housing project, Ballymun Towers is home to a small civilization of residents who can scarcely scratch out a living. Along with the rest of the residents, the two families find themselves cast out from the rest of society dealing with everything from unemployment and illiteracy to drug addiction as they struggle for the basic artifacts of survival.

Bruce Brockman's set design is a somewhat jaw-dropping use of stage space at UWM's Main Stage Theatre. Stylized bare metal scaffolding rises to the ceiling of the 500+ capacity theatre with actors alternating performances between the three tiers of the scaffolding and the stage floor. All of this gives this stage version of Ballymun a staggering feeling of immensity. Taller actors performing on the third tier nearly graze their heads on the top lights. The lighting itself (By Doug Vance, formerly of the Skylight Opera) is quite beautiful, casting a tantalizing colored aura over the stage. There's some rather hypnotic use of silhouettes during key moments of transition. The soundscape ranges from working-class garage punk to clean new-wave synth-music scoring that subtly adds mood to certain moments.

**Director Rebecca Holderness deftly sculpts action into this sumptuous environment. Throughout the production, Holderness maintains a dozen people on the roughly 30'x 40' stage, making things a bit cramped. This is amplified by the nearly one dozen white partial body casts suspended amidst the highest tier of Brockman's set. We get a startlingly clear feeling for just how claustrophobic things are in a housing project. In those moments when people are rumbling through it, the scaffolding rumbles right along with them, giving a profound feel for just how poorly Ballymun was built. And then there are the ropes and harnesses. A rather daring part of the production, they lend a fascinating dynamic to it. The only reason I'm reluctant to go on about in greater detail is the fact that there really isn't any way to describe it in black and white on a glowing screen without it seeming a wee bit pretentious. It's not. At all. When people dream . . . when they are animated by passion. They are elevated off the stage by rope in sturdy body harnesses. People are elevated by their dreams. This premise would only be tacky if the actors didn't sell it as well as they do.**

True, not everyone in the cast is particularly deft at affecting an authentic Irish accent, but none of the voices onstage are disconcertingly bad. It's really much more of an

accomplishment that nearly everyone here does such a potent job of conveying the reality of what these people have been going through for the past several decades. Early on in the show, there's a girl talking about her dreams of becoming a dental hygienist. She compares it to being a flight attendant. Metaphors mix and swish around as two men pull a rope to lift her up. As she speaks, she hovers above the stage from her harness. There's real passion in her voice. Just for a moment, she's flying. It's one of several dozen truly beautiful moments in the production. The UWM Department of Theatre's production of "From These Green Heights" runs now through May 7th at the UWM Main Stage Theatre. Tickets are \$10 (\$7 for students) and can be purchased by calling the box office at 414-229-4308. **VS**

**Russ Bickerstaff** - *Russ Bickerstaff is a local poet and writer. His poems can be heard regularly at Linneman's Monday Poetry Night.*  
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