Sheridan's Promising Tale is Half Told

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Sheridan’s promising tale is half told

You will like Peter Sheridan. By the end of his latest memoir, Break A Leg, he will have won your genuine affections: both as a man and as a socially engaged theatre artist. And as with anyone you like, it might be hard to be critical—hard, but sometimes necessary.

The main problem with Break A Leg is its lack of rigorous editing. The shortcomings of a book culture where interventionist editors are now rare is evident in these pages. Not only are some of the sentences clearly in need of reworking, but there are basic typos throughout the book.

Structurally, too, a good editor’s hand could have sharpened his interesting tale to a finer point. When the work ends, it ends in mid-air. It is quite perplexing. The reader is simply dropped mid-narrative. It’s as if the last three chapters of the book are missing. There is no indication on the dust-jacket that a further volume is forthcoming. Indeed, the subject matter of the memoir hardly merits being thinned out over numerous volumes. There are already times in Break A Leg where the exposition is laboured.

It is a shame, as Sheridan has a story to tell. As a writer and theatre artist, he was at the epicentre of an interesting time in Irish theatre history.

In setting up the Project Theatre Company and Project Arts Centre in Dublin, he was central in dragging the arts in Ireland kicking, and often screaming, out of its 19th century slumber. And where the book is at its best is in its depiction of these frantic days of creativity.

It is fascinating to read about Peter and his more famous director brother, Jim, throughout the 1970s and 1980s. There are intimate insights into the artistic formation of many well-known artists. Bono makes an appearance or two. We meet film director-to-be Neil Jordan as a callow youth. We encounter playwright Hugh Leonard and the late journalist Con Houlihan in the booze-saturated darkness of 1970s Irish pubs. The cast of interesting characters is full and vibrant.

Interesting, too, is the recent social history that forms the backdrop of Sheridan’s narrative. The disappearance of the Dublin dockers; the Hunger Strikes; the heroin epidemic in 1980s Dublin and Charles Haughey’s cynical political manoeuvring—
Peter Sheridan: he will win your affections

Tony O'Shea

Sheridan's story offers insights in all these areas, and many more. Where the personal gives way to the public: this is where the book is at its most interesting.

Indeed, Sheridan's account would be all the more engaging if this were the focus of the book. The back cover promises a memoir of his life in the theatre. What we get is a story that bobs in and out of his marriage, his early years, his addiction to alcohol and his attempts to keep body and soul together as a struggling artist.

Too often there is nothing exceptional in the material to keep us interested. The writing gets bogged down as it leads up to the stuff of interest – like a journalist telling us how they travelled by taxi to interview a star, rather than getting down to the telling of the interview itself.

Maybe Break A Leg is just trying to do too many things. It sets out in its opening pages to be a document for posterity, with Sheridan promising his grandson Xabi an answer to the boy's question, "What did you do in the old days, granddad?".

This personal, familial, intimate register leads to the inclusion of material that might be of great interest privately, but which may not be gripping to a wider audience.

But where the material is interesting (in his struggles with alcohol, for example), there is no resolution in the abrupt ending. There is an unsatisfying sense of incompleteness here. Could it be that Sheridan is tackling the memoir too early in life? This young grandfather might have been better off biding his time, offering us one comprehensive volume in a decade to come.

At his best, Sheridan has a clear and flowing prose. He would have been better served with a sharper production, with the inclusion of photographs, with a refocusing of the book on its most interesting concerns and with a sentence by sentence editor who would have enabled the true potential of his account to come to fruition.

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