

Theatre review: The Artist Man and the Mother Woman, Traverse Theatre (****)

Morna Pearson's bold and unsettling new play at the Traverse Theatre at times has the feeling of a fairy tale, with a pretty improbable set-up, larger-than-life (some might say grotesque) characters and an inexorable unfolding of its strangely compelling story. It's a feeling emphasised by the brightly coloured and pacey production from Traverse artistic director Orla O'Loughlin (her first at the theatre), which is more than happy to flaunt its own artifice – usually to great comic effect, and at key moments to remind us that what we're watching is very much a human creation.

But by its suddenly shocking conclusion, it feels more like some grand, ancient myth of sexual and familial love that's being worked through before us. To be fair, though, the clues to its cataclysmic denouement are there from the start, and the copious laughter that O'Loughlin's knowing production generates grows increasingly uncomfortable as the evening progresses.

The Artist Man of the title is Geoffrey, a 30-something art teacher still living with his overbearing mother Edie. Discovering from a newspaper report that his twin disciplines of art and teaching rank him high up the sexiness scale, he resolves to find a wife, subjecting a handful of unfortunate women to toe-curling interviews before realising that the true love of his life might actually lie closer to home.

Pearson's rugged yet terse Doric text deftly conveys character and emotion with a few simple turns of phrase, seemingly casually thrown together but beautifully crafted. There are plenty of killer lines that almost bring the house down, but

there's also a searing poetry to it all, and O'Loughlin makes the most of that in the declamatory performances she calls for, finely balanced between poignant naturalism and grotesque stylisation.

Garry Collins holds the whole spectacle together – he's rarely off the stage – as a grinning, gurning Geoffrey, still an over-eager kid with his unstoppable optimism and gangly movements. Just a glance to the audience is enough to raise laughs – albeit slightly unsettled ones, maybe. Anne Lacey is a powerful presence as the subtly controlling Edie, and although her part is perhaps a little underwritten, there's a constant sense of needy threat when she's around – never more so than when she refuses to speak to her son for a week. And Molly Innes gives a delightfully quirky performance as Geoffrey's sometime love interest Clara, dance-obsessed yet big-hearted.

Anthony Lamble's intricate set is detailed and full of visual jokes (revealed when kitchen cupboards are opened), and it copes well with the quick cuts between Pearson's 29 short scenes – at times the play feels like it could have been written for television.

In the end, though, it's O'Loughlin's searing production and the strange beauty of the play itself that stand out. Its sudden plummet into darkness might seem a little too speedy, but it's entirely in keeping with the disturbing themes hinted at throughout the play. And the way Pearson neatly balances mythic universality with an endearing localness makes the production at once hilarious and appalling.

[The Artist Man and the Mother Woman](#) continues at the [Traverse Theatre](#) until 17 November