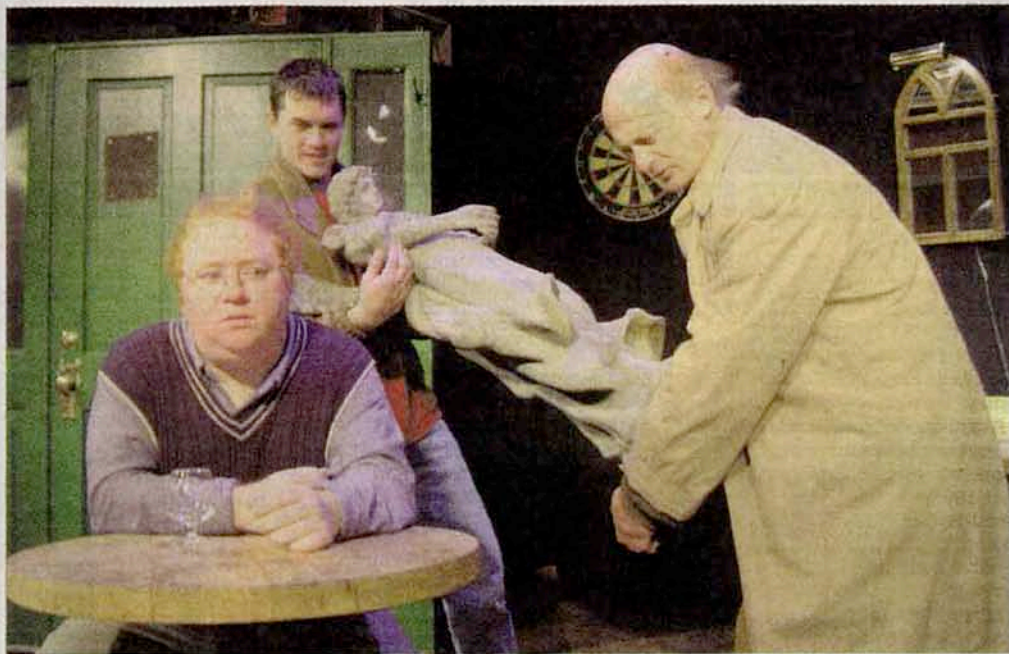


THEATER



PASCAL MARCOTTE

PUB REGULARS: Keith Blaney, left seated, Tripp Pickell and Michael Earl Reid in "Lepers."

EDGEFEST REVIEW

Painful 'Baile Baiste' digs deeply into the wounds from childhood

By F. KATHLEEN FOLEY
Special to The Times

A native of Ireland, Ronan Noone wrote the award-winning "The Lepers of Baile Baiste" while attending graduate school at Boston University. This is not your typical student play. A remarkable effort, "Lepers" is fully fledged and richly mature in every particular, as is the play's shattering current production at the Celtic Arts Center.

There are few surprises here. Noone's drama, which treats the now dismayingly familiar subject of sexual misconduct within the Catholic Church, charts a predictable course. The action is set in the tiny Irish town of Baile Baiste, where some half a dozen young men regularly gather at the local pub. There, in between all the hostile jokes and bristling exchanges, they pour a steady stream of alcohol on the suppurating wounds of the past.

Lonely, bitter bachelors, they

share an open secret. When they were 11 years old, they were viciously abused, both sexually and physically, by a sadistic Catholic brother, who has since moved on to poison the lives of other boys. It's a sad but simple premise that could have been as shallow as yesterday's headline. However, Noone digs so deeply under the skins of these scarred survivors that we feel every twinge of their undiminished suffering.

Director Pascal Marcotte, who also designed the rough-edged, rustic set, goes for the jugular in his ferociously apt staging, which contains plenty of well-timed gallows' humor to underscore the escalating tragedy.

The passionate cast ranges from the capable to the brilliant. A particular standout, Michael Earl Reid, is alternately terrifying and hilarious as Seaneen, a drunken old wastrel who regularly menaces the pub's regulars

with a baling hook.

The most remarkable turn, however, comes from Keith Blaney as Clown, a pudgy, cartoonish character whose agonizing progression from the comical to the tragic is heart-rending. A plum performance in this or any theatrical season, it should not be missed.

'The Lepers of Baile Baiste'

Where: Celtic Arts Center, 4843 Laurel Canyon Blvd., Studio City

When: Fridays-Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Sundays, 2 p.m.

Ends: Nov. 22

Price: \$15

Contact: (818) 760-8322

Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes