Stones in His Pockets – A Delightful Linguistic Challenge Well Worth Taking On

THEATRE // REVIEW

By Steen Blendstrup – Writer

The Olivier Award-winning tragicomedy *Stones in His Pockets* would probably never have made its Danish debut were it not for the English-language theatre companies based in Denmark. It is an experience well worth seeking out for bilingual Danish audiences, even if we don't catch every nuance, writes Steen Blendstrup.

Stones in His Pockets
Playing at Krudttønden until 28 November

Cast: Jefferson Bond, Kevin Kiernan-Molloy
Director: Ian Burns
Playwright: Marie Jones

It has been said of England and the United States that they are “two nations divided by a common language”. The same could certainly be said when we bring other parts of the British Isles into the picture, as happens in *Stones in His Pockets*, which is set during the filming of an American movie in County Kerry, Ireland.

Perhaps the issue is less about the American film stars' somewhat shaky grasp of the Irish dialect than it is about cultural understanding. And this despite the fact that many Americans proudly refer to grandparents or great-grandparents who emigrated from Ireland in the first place.

From a Danish perspective, *Stones in His Pockets* highlights the value of having a handful of English-language theatre companies in Copenhagen. The linguistic subtleties simply cannot be translated. I very much doubt that Marie Jones's Olivier Award-winning play would have made it to Denmark without That Theatre Company.

So even if bilingual Danish audiences may find themselves facing a bit of a challenge during the first five minutes, as we adjust to unfamiliar pronunciation and vocabulary that isn't readily available in our short-term memory, the effort is well worth it.

Stones in His Pockets – Irish Fighting Spirit

Stones in His Pockets is described as a tragicomedy. In this genre, it is almost a dramaturgical cliché to have a comic first act followed by a darker second act, and when we head out for the interval, that is probably what we expect. But what a surprise we are in for.

Kevin Kiernan-Molloy and Jefferson Bond are the only two actors playing all the roles in *Stones in His Pockets*. This is a greater challenge on stage than in a film, where you can

simply cut from one scene to another and only see what the camera chooses to show us. But with a little help from our imagination, they pull it off.

The tone of the second act is certainly coloured by a tragic suicide brought about by shattered dreams. Yet the dream lives on, and Irish humour does not die in the face of a little adversity. Nor does the Irish fighting spirit.

In a way, the centuries-long struggle against English domination in *Stones in His Pockets* is replaced by a battle against American cultural imperialism. Somewhere in that story, there is a good screenplay waiting to be written...

Somewhere in the Irish Mountains...

But back to the stage at Krudttønden. Jefferson Bond and Kevin Kiernan-Molloy stand in front of a backdrop depicting a beautiful Irish coastal landscape. They are two young men, Charlie and Jake, who have landed jobs as extras in an American film. Forty pounds a day, plus two decent meals. A little more luxurious than the conditions endured by day labourers of old, but day labourers all the same.

As many will know, Ireland is frequently used as a filming location. Partly because of its landscapes, and partly because favourable tax arrangements attract Hollywood productions. It was not quite so common in the old days, which makes old Mickey something of a local celebrity. Many years ago, he was also an extra in John Wayne's film *The Quiet Man*. But be careful not to mention it, because once he gets started, he'll talk for the next hour. Preferably over a pint down at the pub.

From an acting perspective, it is a real treat to watch Jefferson Bond and Kevin Kiernan-Molloy take on not only Charlie and Jake, but also Mickey and all the other extras, as well as the American director and his entire crew. Bond also plays the charming and very, very beautiful female star, who is struggling with the accent.

Somehow, the fact that we have to use our imagination actually helps create the illusion. Suddenly, we can see the film crew, the lighting equipment, the cameras and everything else unfolding before our eyes. And, of course, the backdrop makes perfect sense for what it is: a theatrical set.

Hollywood Dreams

This creates room not only for a little romance, but also for an unmasking of the romanticised image of Ireland and Irish history – particularly the version perpetuated by Hollywood. The story may take place in Ireland, but it is an Ireland that has never actually existed.

On the one hand, Charlie and Jake are perfectly capable of laughing at the eccentric Americans. On the other, they have also bought into the dream themselves. Jake has tried his luck in the United States, but has yet to find a pot of gold over there. Charlie carries a screenplay in his inside pocket, hoping for a chance to pitch it to the director or one of the producers. The shortcut to success is always tempting.

We never actually get to read Charlie's screenplay in *Stones in His Pockets*, but we are left in no doubt that it is inspired by his previous career as the owner of a video rental shop. More Hollywood dreams, in other words.

Stones in His Pockets also employs cinematic storytelling techniques such as flashbacks. We catch glimpses of the characters' childhoods. Or we get to witness scenes that have previously only been recounted to us, allowing us to discover that people don't always tell the truth.

Based on True Events (Almost)

Of course, neither do films. We know this perfectly well in real life, but there is an entire subgenre of films that shows us how the cinematic illusion is created. Often in the form of comedies.

And we are more than happy to laugh along with Charlie and Jake in *Stones in His Pockets* when they are instructed to react to the stars, even though the stars aren't actually there. We can also laugh at the stars' attempts to "just be one of the crew", while living separately from the common folk in their Winnebagos (they are apparently too posh for trailers), protected by security guards.

And yes, there is also a touch of European intellectual superiority when it comes to the Americans' often limited historical and cultural horizons. We smile and shake our heads a little, before proceeding to do exactly what the mighty dollar is paying us to do.

A Linguistic Challenge Well Worth Taking On

Although *Stones in His Pockets* moves along at a lively pace, there is room on stage for certain nuances that we don't always get in film, at least not in commercial American productions. There is another tone to it, too.

The hope that can exist in the midst of tragedy does not need to be expressed through some bombastic declaration along the lines of "They may take our lives, but they'll never take our freedom". And yet, that spirit is very much present.

It is quintessentially British – or, in this case, Irish – in its understated humour and profoundly human outlook. Everyone needs dreams. They just don't necessarily have to be Hollywood dreams.

Bond and Kiernan-Molloy deliver masterful performances, effortlessly switching between their many characters, including the changes in accent between Irish English and American English.

The acting alone is worth the price of a ticket to *Stones in His Pockets*. The play itself is both funny and moving, and wonderfully uplifting. And it is a delightful linguistic challenge for Copenhagen's bilingual audiences.