

Hollywood Valhalla by Aidan Harney

Reviews so far...

"Mesmerising... Harney's sharp and self-assured script is... the most entertaining, dramatically satisfying two-hander I've witnessed for some time."

Hollywood Valhalla, Aidan Harney - IRISH INDEPENDENT, January 31, 2012, John McKeown

"Harney's humour shines like a row of paparazzi flash-bulbs... nuanced and affecting while exposing society's unrelenting obsession with celebrity, and the consequences of saving face." FOUR STARS * * * *

Hollywood Valhalla, Aidan Harney - METRO, January 2012, Lucy White

"It's quite an achievement... whimsical, courageous, dignified"

Hollywood Valhalla, Aidan Harney - SUNDAY INDEPENDENT, January 2012, Emer O'Kelly

FOUR STARS * * * *

Hollywood Valhalla, Aidan Harney - THE IRISH MAIL ON SUNDAY, January 2012, Michael Moffatt

REVIEWS

THEATRE

HOLLYWOOD VALHALLA

BEWLEYS CAFE THEATRE,
DUBLIN

HOLLYWOOD star Rock Hudson was the first major celebrity to admit to having contracted HIV, not only admitting his homosexuality but kick-starting the gradual public acceptance of the disease. It can't have been easy. This six-foot six-inch embodiment of All-American machismo was a household name thanks to *Macmillan & Wife*, and in the early 80s, *Dynasty*.

Aidan Harney's new short play focuses on the build-up to Hudson's public confession as he struggles with scripts, obtrusive memories and complications from his relationship with fitness coach and lover Toby.

The complications are mostly of Rock's (Patrick Joseph Byrnes) own making, as he's kept the true nature of his illness hidden from the long-suffering Toby (Stewart Roche). This provides a rich source of underlying tension as Rock reminisces about former lovers, his wife Phyllis, the one woman who truly loved him despite infecting her with hepatitis, the Reagans – Nancy has a filthy sense of humour – and gamely tries to keep Toby off the scent. Toby is no fool, however, and this very odd couple alternate between bouts of restrained affection and bare-knuckle truth-telling.

Under Joe Devlin's deft direction, Byrnes and Roche deliver a mesmerising duet, the most entertaining, dramatically satisfying two-hander I've witnessed for some time. Tall, slightly stooped, frail, and looking almost jaundiced, Byrnes is the epitome of the burned out Hollywood Great with the egotistical fires still capable of putting flames in the eyes. In stark contrast, Roche's Toby is gauche, shamelessly ignorant of the arts, simple and direct, yet keeping an eye on his own financial self-interest.

Convincingly at home with each other, both are alight with a natural earnestness in their reminiscences, particularly when relating their experiences of first love, both vividly exemplifying the redemptive power of memory.

Harney's sharp and self-assured script is rich in gallops humour too, mostly from the stricken Hudson, his quips and asides lightening an increasingly dark situation.

It matters little how close Harney's play approaches the real Hudson, but it would be nice to think he was something like this attractive mix of fading strength and emerging vulnerability, struggling to salvage some self-esteem from what he regards as a wasted life, and perhaps doing some good for others in the process.

JOHN MCKEOWN

Portrait of an idol's ordeal

Michael Moffatt

Hollywood Valhalla
Bewley's Café
Theatre
Until Feb. 11
★★★★★

In the 1981 TV mini-series *The Star Maker*, Rock Hudson played a Hollywood director who turns sexy girls into stars, then marries and dumps them. However when an older female pursues him, the Hudson character gets rid of her by letting her find him in bed with a man. Considering Hudson's homosexuality was one of Hollywood's best-kept secrets, it was an audacious insider joke. Within a few years the handsome actor was dead from the effects of AIDS. He had previously played a similar game in *Pillow Talk* with Doris Day, dangling his little finger and implying that he was more a mammy's boy than a ladies' man.

It was fitting, then, that the first the world saw of the ravages of AIDS on Hudson's physique was when he appeared on Day's TV programme in 1985, looking like a skeleton. The misinformation about his condition continued long after he was diagnosed in 1984. It was said he had anorexia, and later that he had cancer, before it was confirmed he was dying of AIDS.

Actors were commonly reported in magazines as saying that despite the glamour, all they really wanted was a simple life with marriage and a family.

In 1955 *Life* magazine had thrown down a challenge, running a photo cover with the heading 'Hollywood's most handsome bachelor' and continuing: 'Fans are urging 29-year-old Hudson to get married - or explain why not.'

And the scandal-mag *Confidential* was mad keen to explain why not. A jealous actor offered it pictures that



DYING DAYS:

Patrick Joseph Byrnes as Rock Hudson in *Hollywood Valhalla*

would ruin Hudson. But Hudson's ruthless agent Henry Willson, ordered some rough-house action against the blackmailer and bought off the magazine with scandal about two lesser actors. Willson decided to kill the rumours by getting Hudson married to his own secretary, Phyllis Gates. The marriage lasted just three years.

After Hudson's death, lurid details of his sexual lifestyle became public when a longtime partner, Marc Christian, sued the actor's estate on grounds of 'intentional infliction of emotional distress.' Hudson had kept his illness a secret and the two men had engaged in sexual activity

after the AIDS diagnosis. He got \$5million compensation. A month before his death in October 1985, Hudson reportedly sent a telegram to a Hollywood AIDS benefit saying: 'I am as happy that I am sick. I am not happy that I have AIDS. But if that is helping other I can at least know that my own misfortune has had some positive worth.'

There were doubts that Hudson, in his advanced condition, could know about the telegram. But one thing is certain: the medical world and gay organisations used it to lobby successfully for research money.

This new 60-minute play by Aiden Harney implies Hudson supported the telegram. It begins when he is about to take a role in *Dynasty*. Hudson (Patrick Joseph Byrnes) and his loyal trainer Toby (Stewart Roche) are trying to cope with the effect of Hudson's disease on their lives. Toby, a married man, is terrified about the implications of his close association with Hudson. His marriage is already suffering. They quarrel and laugh over the bleak situation as hordes of pressmen camp outside.

Hudson is seen listless and exhausted and looking nostalgically back over life. The play doesn't go deeply into the horror that must have gripped him as he contemplated his emaciated body, the exposure of his lifestyle and his shattered public image, but both actors give strong performances in an absorbing play that portrays two men coping in different ways with a terrible situation.

Hudson's partner sued for 'emotional distress'

Hidden life of a Hollywood hunk

THEATRE

EMER O'KELLY

IF EVER a Hollywood star inhabited Tinseltown's hall of the kings, it was Rock Hudson. The hunky glamour boy was forced to live his life in the shadows because he was homosexual, and was forced finally to acknowledge his "status" in the most tragic way possible, announcing that he was dying of Aids.

Aidan Harney has written *Hollywood Valhalla* as a tribute to the star, his career, and his death. It's a lunchtime production at Bewley's in Grafton Street in Dublin, and it's quite an achievement. Harney makes the star whimsical, courageous, dignified and only slightly self-pitying as he lives out his last weeks with only the company of his personal trainer, who is straight, but has lost his wife because of his dedication to his job.

In the Eighties, when Aids hysteria was at its height,

Hudson was abandoned by friends and colleagues alike, suffering as he was from the "plague" — a sure-fire killer, felt to be so contagious it could be contracted from using a washed cup previously used by a patient.

For the religious right, Aids was celebrated as god's vengeance for the crime of homosexuality. For everyone else, it was a reminder that science still has its limits.

Patrick Joseph Byrne plays Hudson with quiet conviction, well and ironically balanced by Stewart Roche as the genuinely macho Toby who still has the humanity to love his disintegrating employer.

Director Joe Devlin holds the dignity and pathos together with a sure touch.

Unfortunately, of course, it is a picture far from the documented truth, with the reality of Hudson's death a series of gatherings of screaming queens and hysterical spiritualist seances making the dying man's last days hideous.

THEATRE REVIEW

Rock and role

Hollywood Valhalla

★★★★

'Once I had a secret love...' warbles Doris Day at the opening of *Hollywood Valhalla*, Aidan Harney's fictional play about an ailing Rock Hudson set in the 1980s. It's a song that sets the tone for this intimate two-man show in which the former superstar – one of Hollywood's first major celebrities to die from an Aids-related illness – is forced not only to confront home truths but also his past, the chintz room divider in his Beverly Hills mansion as threadbare as his matinée idol image. Hudson's new role in *Dynasty* is both a blessing and a curse, at once massaging his ego and manoeuvring him towards the inevitable

parazzi flash-bulbs thanks to the touching bromance between Hudson (Patrick Joseph Byrnes) and his personal trainer Toby (Stewart Roche) – who's as much a housekeeper, cook and nurse as a fitness guru. It is the almost-marital exchanges between the pair that reveal one another's backstories, each delivered with realistic dialogue where sentences falter and trail off as they struggle to find the right words or indeed dare speak the truth. Under Joe Devlin's deft direction, Byrnes' and Roches' performances are both nuanced and affecting while exposing society's unrelenting obsession with celebrity, and the consequences of saving face.

Lucy White

Until Feb 11,
Bewley's
Café
Theatre,
78/79
Grafton
Street
D2,
12.50pm,
€8 to €12.
Tel: 086 878
4001. www.bewleyscafetheatre.com



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