

Review: Years of Sunlight at Theatre503

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Guilt, bitterness and grief: B. L. Sherrington reviews Michael McLean's Years of Sunlight.

[B. L. SHERRINGTON](#)



Years of Sunlight at Theatre503. Photo: Alex Harvey Brown.

When bitterness meets guilt, chaos is almost guaranteed. In Michael McLean's *Years of Sunlight*, directed by Amelia Sears, the full range of emotions associated with grief are clear as day in this semi-flashback production.

Jumping feet first into the emotional journey, the play opens with mother and son, Hazel (Miranda Foster) and Paul (Mark Rice-Oxley), reunited upon the death of his best friend Emlyn (Bryan Dick), who had been like a second son to Hazel. It's tense to say the least. It's also unclear as to how long parent and child have been separated, but when Paul discovers his neighbour Bob (John Biggins), died the previous year it's obvious the relationship has been distant for some time.

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Paul and Hazel represent grief at different stages. When she hears of the state of Emlyn's body she is in a flood of tears, whilst Paul criticizes Hazel's parenting skills, calling her 'a soft touch'. Rice-Oxley's portrayal of regret comes across as bitterness. "He felt like a baby. He looked like a prisoner of war," Hazel counteractively

protests, her innate need to defend herself suggesting guilt.

The relationship between Rice-Oxley's Paul and Dick's Emlyn, is interesting as an extreme exaggeration of glorified sibling rivalry. On the surface, Dick's portrayal of an addict is coherent with the stereotype. When we meet him he's wearing dirty clothes, looks as if he hasn't washed in days if not weeks, portrays violent tendencies and is defensive to the point of joking about alcoholism. McLean and Sears cleverly counteract this image by showing the audience what led to his addiction.

It's through this that we firstly discover Paul's apparent bitterness is more likely guilt for his negative and manipulative ways. He previously tried to take Emlyn away from the area they lived in, one which he continues to look

down on. He also insisted of not letting Emlyn forget the mistakes he'd made by suggesting he use his glue sniffing past to inspire his artwork: "Guilt is art," he insists. When they meet after Paul is having trouble in his personal life, Paul manipulates Emlyn into giving him money, but then never wants to see him again. In this moment, Paul is actually the selfish friend and the one with the personality traits we had come to connect with Emlyn's addict ways.

Much of the play's strength in drawing the audience into each scene is contained in the sound and set design. Images connected to the pop culture of each decade immediately evoke the chosen time period. Using flashbacks also allows us to meet Bob, the neighbour who leaves much to be desired. Upon first meeting him, he is an elderly man with difficulty speaking – most likely the result of a stroke – and Emlyn is taunting him. "Did someone hit you on the head as a baby?" he says, threatening to assault Bob. Naturally we sympathise with Bob, as an almost helpless old man, but upon realising the relationship between Bob and Emlyn, the tables turn. Emlyn was actually the one assaulted by Bob, an experience that directly led to his addiction, which originated as a coping mechanism.

This is the moment where Paul's relationship with Emlyn changes forever. At 11 years old, Hazel is boasting about how happy Paul is to meet Emlyn, but but the time they turn into teenagers Emlyn's need to escape the pain had enlarged and his drinking has begun, which subsequently makes the relationship between Emlyn and Bob even worse. Bob believes without a doubt in his mind that all the children brought to Liverpool as a result of overcrowding are the same. He bemoans the graffiti on his beloved golf club declaring 'fat Tory cunt'. When the teenage Emlyn sees the humour in it a very temporary shifting of power takes place between the characters.

The play ends with Paul trying to take Hazel back to Dublin with him. It's a failed attempt because of the contrasting emotions they have towards Emlyn's death means their strained relationship can never be salvaged.

Ultimately, *Years of Sunlight* has an educational element to it. It shows how we are often quick to judge those with lives on a downward trajectory, but are less willing to analyse what put them on that path in the first place.

Years of Sunlight is on at Theatre 503 until 18th February 2017. Click [here](#) for more details.

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DIRECTED BY Amelia Sears

WRITTEN BY Michael McLean

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