



**MACABRE DUO: Christopher Walken (left) and Sam Rockwell in
*A Behanding in Spokane***

Photo: Joan Marcus

**Christopher Walken is superb, but McDonagh's
plot wears thin in *A Behanding in Spokane***

A BEHANDING IN SPOKANE

Written by Martin McDonagh

Directed by John Crowley

Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre

236 West 45th Street

(212-239-6200), www.abehandinginspokane.com

By Scott Harrah

A Behanding in Spokane may be the first American-set play by renowned Anglo-Irish playwright Martin McDonagh, but it is also one of his most flawed. The premise—a man(Christopher Walken) searches for his missing hand while dealing with two con artists (Anthony Mackie and Zoe Kazan) and a high-strung hotel clerk (Sam Rockwell)—is full of McDonagh's trademark black humor, but the show is ultimately disappointing, with a threadbare narrative, plot twists that make little sense, and a storyline that simply goes nowhere.

Walken, as lead character Carmichael, is marvelously creepy. Walken has the eccentricities of his character down well, from his nervous mannerisms to his bizarre quest to find a hand severed from his body 47 years ago. As he stands in a disheveled, fleabag hotel room, he's natural and completely believable, but Walken's outstanding performance alone cannot keep the show from collapsing through its many plot holes.

Mackie and Kazan play Toby and Marilyn, two scammers that try to sell Carmichael a supposedly mummified version of his severed hand. It's difficult to pinpoint just exactly what McDonagh has in mind with such macabre material, but it doesn't work as either a farce or a dark comedy. Many elements of the show seem to have been thrown in for mere shock value, such as Carmichael's racist predilection for bandying about the "n" word whenever discussing African-Americans.

Without giving too much of the story away—not that there's much here to begin with—many scenes defy logic. We are supposed to believe that, when shackled to pipes while standing near an open window, Toby and Marilyn are left defenseless as a candle burns inside a gasoline can. Couldn't the two charlatans simply break the window and yell for help?

Kazan is too strident for the role of lady grifter Marilyn. She shrieks and screeches out lines of dialogue, and Mackie is equally inept. Both are like cartoon caricatures of bad guys. This could either be blamed on miscasting or John Crowley's direction, but it doesn't really matter.

Only Sam Rockwell, as hotel clerk Mervyn, is able to match Walken's first-rate level of hilariously overstated folly. He's riveting while delivering a monologue about monkeys, but unfortunately it's not enough to overshadow the uneven performances of Kazan and Mackie, and the dull denouement of McDonagh's half-baked story.

It's truly a pity that McDonagh, who's brought us such theatrical masterpieces as *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, *The Pillowman*, and *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, wrote such a middling work for his first play set on American soil. Perhaps his absurdist Irish sensibilities—so powerful in the aforementioned shows— simply

cannot work in an American setting. However, a shoddily constructed play like this would have little onstage fireworks regardless of geography.

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