



HAIL MARY: Fiona Shaw in *The Testament of Mary* Photo: Paul Kolnik



Theater Review

The Testament of Mary: The provocative Gospel according to the mother of Christ

THE TESTAMENT OF MARY

Written by Colm Tóibín, adapted from his novella

Directed by Deborah Warner

Walter Kerr Theatre

219 West 48th Street

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

By Scott Harrah

Little has ever really been known or discussed in such detail about the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus Christ, until now. In this riveting, intense Broadway chronicle of Mary's story by Colm Tóibín, adapted for the stage from his titular bestselling 2012 novella, Mary is not just the immaculately conceived, silent deity that Catholics and other Christians pray to for guidance and the washing away of sins. She is a woman who demands to be heard. We know of Mary's pristine image, but little of her side of "the Greatest Story Ever Told." Now, through the outstanding, bravura performance of Irish actress Fiona Shaw and Mr. Tóibín's controversial book, Mary is brought to life, but she is hardly the pious, silent figure most think "the Blessed Virgin Mother" was. Ms. Shaw and Mr. Tóibín paint a portrait of Mary as a grieving, angry mother that will move many, anger and frustrate some, and confuse others, but it is still one of the most provocative and unforgettable solo shows produced in the past decade.

The Testament of Mary is, quite simply, the Gospel according to Christ's mother. It has already outraged some Catholics (the show has been protested by many with picket signs). Without giving too much away, Mr. Tóibín's dialogue debunks much of the sanctity and divinity of Christ, portraying him more as a human being who became a leader, not simply the Messiah and "Son of God." Ms. Shaw's Mary won't mention her son's name, and she refers to the apostles as a group of "misfits." She questions Christ's "miracles," such as turning water into wine, and wishes she could have kept him safe at home and possibly prevented his glorious rise and tragic crucifixion. Whether this is all sacrilegious is open to debate, but Mr. Tóibín deserves kudos for pointing out that Mary was a nurturing mother and an earthbound Jewish woman in ancient Judea with principles, first and foremost, and by nature mothers wish to protect their sons. The stories of Lazarus coming back from the dead, the grim scene in

Calvary the day Christ was crucified, the grisly anecdotes about the pain he felt as the Romans nailed him to the cross, and the purported “resurrection” are all told with lacerating honesty by Ms. Shaw’s Mary, but with cathartic hostility and bitterness instead of solemnity.

This is a show one either loves or hates. Ultra-orthodox Christians will dislike it and label the play blasphemous simply because there was no Gospel about Mary’s feelings about her son. Others will take issue with director Deborah Warner’s experimental directorial choices. Ms. Shaw’s performance is powerful, as is Mr. Tóibín’s dialogue, so it is easy to gripe about Ms. Warner’s gimmicky direction of the onstage antics. Each time Ms. Shaw comes to a pivotal episode in the play, Ms. Warner’s direction stops the momentum by making Mary change clothes, overturn tables, or shriek. The material is so intrinsically engrossing on its own that there is no need for all these histrionics, much of which simply interrupt the arc of the character and the narrative. It is a shame that Ms. Shaw was not allowed to simply recite and act out Mr. Tóibín’s masterpiece of a script. Good direction is subtle and should not constantly remind us of its existence.

Those who weren’t brought up in the Christian faith may not see the significance of Ms. Shaw chopping up a fish, the original symbol of early Christianity that was found carved into the catacombs beneath ancient Rome. In modern times, the fish still signifies the purpose of both Catholic and Protestant fellowships and charitable organizations. As Ms. Shaw hacks at the fish with a knife, quivering with disdain, we feel her anger of her son being crucified in the name of a new religion and dying for humanity’s sins. However, if you never studied the Catholic or Protestant catechisms at church, the fish scene makes absolutely no sense.

The only other prop here that has genuine religious significance is Jacob’s Ladder, representing Christ as the mediator, put on earth to make humanity reconnect with God and find the proverbial “Stairway to Heaven.” Ms. Shaw pulls and yanks the ladder around all over the stage, trembling as she shrieks out dialogue like a madwoman. This is brilliant to those of us raised in the dogma of “The Word,” having the tale of the Ladder and Christ drilled into our heads at an early age in Sunday school, but will seem pointless and too over-the-top for others.

This Mary drinks, smokes cigarettes, devours honey, plays with barbed wire, earthenware jugs and strips off her clothes until she is naked and takes a bath. Is it all necessary or even historically accurate? Probably not. However, Ms. Shaw’s razor-sharp acting and the seamless, thought-provoking material she has been given to recite in this 85-minute one act overshadow and eclipse the flaws of Deborah Warner’s direction.

The Testament of Mary has arrived at a time when, around the world, everyone is questioning religion, particularly Catholicism and the hypocrisy of traditional Christianity. Mr. Tóibín’s dialogue and narrative is cerebral, biting, all-consuming and gripping, and Ms. Shaw’s delivery consistently illuminating, impassioned and energetic, so the show would work marvelously without all the props and roaming around the stage. It is an exhausting play, emotionally and physically, for Ms. Shaw, but one that elicits all kinds of reactions from audiences, and that is what great art and theater is all about.

Edited by Scott Harrah

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