

## Mark Lambert and Tina Kellegher star in *Isla*

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*Isla*

Civic Theatre, Tallaght

★★★★☆

“I am the victim here,” Roger (Mark Lambert) shouts at the climax of *Isla*’s second half. For the audience, how he has ended up here is no mystery, but, unknown to him, his journey is only starting.

The play begins with a familiar vista: it is March 2020, and the Covid-19 pandemic has caused Ireland to go into lockdown. As Roger says, sure it will only last three weeks. Amid this global crisis, and concerned for her elderly father, Erin (Tina Kellegher) decides to buy him a virtual assistant for company. This device, named *Isla* (voiced by Sarah Madigan), helps a reluctant Roger to navigate this changing world and to try to hold back the tide of lockdown loneliness. Although he resists her help at first, Roger comes to rely on *Isla*, not realising that this will become a life-changing relationship.

At first glance this play appears to be a fairly typical example of deep realism. The set, designed by Florentina Burcea, is a contained but detailed representation of a middle-class home. The house’s adornments reveal secrets about its occupant and illuminate the eccentricities and challenges associated with living alone after decades of marriage. Burcea, alongside the lighting designer Colin Doran and the sound designer Ben Keighley, create a complex world for the play’s protagonists, one of which is an electronic appliance.

The ensemble of Lambert, Kellegher and Madigan deliver strong performances that capture the essence of the complex interpersonal dynamics that pepper the play’s world. In particular, Lambert’s portrayal of loneliness is touching. These strong performances are built on the foundation of Tim Price’s script, which is surprising in its depth. Davey Kellegher, the production’s director, navigates the cast through some of the play’s potentially clunky moments with deftness and care to the subject matter.

What is really special about this poignant production, however, is that there is no way of predicting the eventual shape of this play’s second half. The pay-off is worth the pivot, and elevates what is already a sharp and rich text to something that really challenges the characters’ way of viewing the world. It also weighs heavily on the audience. When Roger receives a visit from a community garda, the message she delivers leaps across the fourth wall, posing questions to the audience that may be hard for them to answer. In *Isla*, confrontation becomes a mirror, not only for itself but also for the society it is responding to.

*Isla* continues at the [Civic Theatre](#), as part of [Dublin Theatre Festival](#), until Saturday, October 7th