Meet Me At Dawn, production photo, 2019

In April, X & ***Pawn*** attended *Grief Is A Thing With Feathers* at Barbican; Enda Walsh's theatrical adaptation of Max Porter's novel. In that production, Cillian Murphy plays a husband, and father of two young boys, as he tries to cope with the loss of his partner. It is through the intervention of, and his eventual transformation into, *Crow*, a force of denial and liberation, that his grief is made tangible, and ultimately…

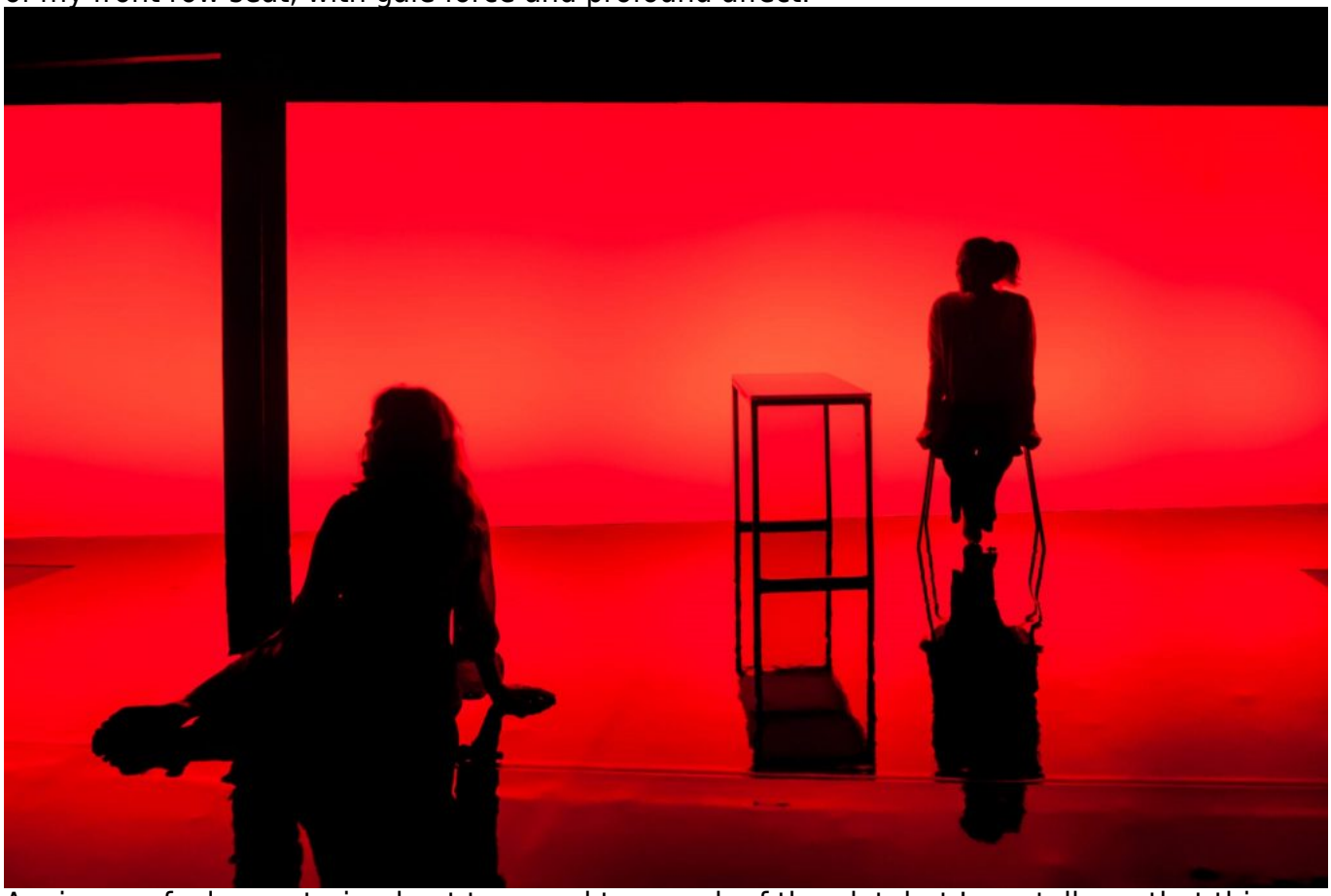
Ultimately what? There often are no happy endings with grieving. No tidy wrapping up and stowing away of these large, powerful, emotions uncorked by the loss of a loved one. *Grief Is A Thing With Feathers* didn't try to offer us one. Neither, tonight, did *Meet Me At Dawn*, the new Zinnie Harris piece presented by DOT Theatre and Arcola.

It's hard to write about a show like *Meet Me…* without feeling as if one is giving away too much of the plot. I will tell you this much; at its core, it's a play about grief.

Pawn first reported on Arcola over a decade ago, with *The Living Unknown Soldier*, a rumination on a different sort of loss; loss of self, of identity, but also the desperation of grief. Whilst familiar with small playhouses, studio work and the like, it was a handful of productions seen on that long-ago trip which fed the fire of my affection for Off-, and Off-Off-productions — be they off of Broadway of off of the West End. Another show that trip, *Thin Toes,* at Pleasance, prompted this comment:

Sitting in the small performance space with only about twenty or thirty other people, the theatre in the round presentation meant that we all were within feet of these actors and yet they neither dialed down their performances nor acknowledged the audience in whose laps they were nearly sitting. In such an environment it is easy to detect small flaws that a more

typical theatre setting might disguise.
Arcola's Studio 1 is not so small a space, but preserves the intimacy of the performance. And, in this case at least, some of the most fraught scenes of *Meet Me…* came down on top of my front row seat, with gale force and profound affect.



Again, one feels constrained not to reveal too much of the plot, but I can tell you that this production, starring Jessica Hardwick as Helen and Marianne Oldham as Robyn, is a deft two hander, expertly directed by Murat Daltaban, which will drag you into the heart and soul of grief, and do so almost without warning. One moment you share these two lady's prosaic, if troubled, concerns about the fallout from a boating accident — is one concussed? which direction will get them off of this sand bar and back home? — and the next you feel you have gone into the drink with them and are fighting to get back to the surface, gasping for air.
Grief is a place, a place where the rules are not the same
Robyn in Meet Me At Dawn, by Zinnie Harris
Recent months have been particularly harsh ones in ***Pawn's*** circle of friends, and no small amount of grief is bound up inside this fragile carapace. *Meet Me…* broke that wide open. Thankfully a tissue (a Kleenex® brand "Mansize" tissue, mind you) was close at hand, but no effort was made to conceal the tears or near-sobs which ensued. Thankfully, at just an hour in length, the release was over soon enough. But in a good way.
Two people on a small stage, before an audience, can be a fraught enough situation all on its own. There were few props populating this island upon which our protagonists are marooned. A single table and chair; that's all. A blank wall upstage is lit in changing colours, shifting with mood, and at times overwhelming the front lights. The lighting, by Cem Yilmazer, bore silent

witness to the action on stage, never too much, always in compliment. Likewise, O?uz Kaplangi's score slips by, just beneath consciousness, but propelling us forward.
But it is this lovely, aching, moving script by Harris (*How To Hold Your Breath*, Royal Court; *Further than the Furthest Thing*, National Theatre; *Rhinoceros*, Edinburgh Lyceum) which drives this piece. That, and the incredible performances of Ms Hardwick and Ms Oldham. A particularly sharp scene, deep into the denouement, brought an intense confrontation between griever and grieved right up to my seat, and nearly reduced me to a blubbering mass. Only the pure shock of the outburst prevented that meltdown, but, ultimately, that Mansize Kleenex was put to the test.

After the bows, the house lights came up, and a woman sitting a few feet from me leaned in and, with a kind hand on my shoulder, inquired, "Are you alright?"
After re-reading this, it's clear I wrote too much about myself and not enough about the play. It is most important that you see that it wasn't just that I was thin skinned to the subject matter; it's that the play does such a good job of bringing us inside of Robyn's grief. I would have been reduced to sobs regardless of my own recent losses. This play is just that effective, like a fortune teller or cheap medium, of persuading us that *it knows how we feel*, and we *do know* how she feels.
Meet Me At Dawn in performances at Arcola Theatre, 24 Ashwin Street, London E8 3DL, through 9 November 2019. Tickets at the website. #MeetMeAtDawn @arcolatheatre