

THE END OF HOPE BY DAVID IRELAND
OCTOBER 2017 AT THE SOHO THEATRE (MAIN STAGE)
DIRECTED BY MAX ELTON

OFF WEST END AWARD FINALIST FOR BEST NEW PLAY
SATURDAY REVIEW, BBC RADIO 4 – ONE OF 15 SELECTED PLAYS OF 2017

ABOUT THE PLAY

‘Everywhere in the world where there’s a war about religion, two people from each side should have sex. That would bring world peace. We should literally make love and not war’

Dermot and Janet are about to have a one night stand. Before sealing the deal, though, Dermot must:

- a) Check she agrees that Tony Blair’s a war criminal.
- b) Establish whether she killed her ex-husband
- c) Find out why she’s dressed as a giant mouse

PRESS RESPONSES

The Times
Chris Bennion
★★★★

The Northern Irish playwright David Ireland gave us one of the best — and easily the most astonishing— plays of 2016 with *Cyprus Avenue*. In it, a Belfast loyalist named Eric becomes obsessed with the idea that his month-old granddaughter is Gerry Adams. He goes as far as to draw a beard on her with permanent marker. *The End of Hope* (a co-production between Soho Theatre and the Orange Tree Theatre, Richmond) begins with a man indulging in some vigorous rumpy-pumpy with a 5ft mouse. Ireland, clearly, likes to grab your attention.

We’re in Belfast again, where Janet and Dermot have hooked up via the internet for a night of casual sex. “I’ve never had sex with a giant mouse before,” says Dermot, post-coitus. “That was nice,” says Janet, the mouse. Ireland is no gimmicky writer, however, and just as Eric’s baby-Gerry delusion was a device with which to eviscerate sectarian politics, so Janet’s mouse costume — which Elinor Lawless wears throughout — is an entry point to a freewheeling, majestically entertaining, all-too-brief hour that touches on everything from religion and identity to body dysmorphia and the various merits of ITV programming.

The pillow talk in this devious little two-hander starts innocently enough, but Dermot starts to notice red flags when Janet describes choking her husband to death with a courgette and dismisses Channel 4 as a network for “gay, deaf

Pakistanis". Janet is coarse, abrasive, witty and dangerous — and she knows how to push all of Dermot's woolly liberal buttons. Dermot is left floundering, not knowing if he is a man or a mouse. "Don't get me started on Tony Blair!" he cries, unprompted. Sublime.

Ireland's plays are about people at odds. With each other — Catholic v Protestant, Irish v British, ITV v Channel 4 — but also, more importantly, with themselves. His characters are walking bundles of conflict, waging war against different sides of their personality, never quite able to make peace with who they are. Dermot is the chauvinist feminist, Janet the outrageous recluse. The director, Max Elton, wisely opts for a light touch, putting Ireland's rich dialogue front and centre.

Rufus Wright is excellent as the self-important Dermot, but it is Lawless who embodies Ireland's biting, incandescent, thoroughly salty writing. You could listen to her barbed asides, in that east Belfast brogue, all evening. Did I mention it is funny? It is. Absolutely hilarious. This mouse roars.

WhatsOnStage

Matt Trueman

★★★★★

Two bodies are bouncing on a circular bed, properly going for it. As they come to a climax, the satin covers slip off, revealing a middle-aged man and – um – a human-sized mouse. The lovers collapse, catch their post-coital breath. "I've never slept with a giant mouse before." Well, right. Who has?

For all that David Ireland's two-hander is a raunchy little romcom, it's also a piece packing explosives in its pants. The personal, here, is absolutely political, so that a *Brief Encounter* for the Tinder generation doubles up as an affront on male entitlement and arbitrary cultural divides.

At its simplest, *The End of Hope* spoofs the shape of modern love. Hook-up culture, it says, gets it all back to front. A play that starts with a furious shag ends with an introduction and a first kiss. The mouse is a young woman from Belfast, rife with insecurities, who's freed up by the anonymity of a costume. The bloke is the latest in a long line of hook-ups. Over the course of the play, their getting-to-know-you runs in reverse.

Ireland has plenty of fun with that, spinning lies and assumptions in every direction as these two lovers-cum-strangers try to pin each other down. She's playful, spinning stories about her late husband's demise. He's presumptuous, insistently imposing labels on her. It becomes increasingly obvious that they've no common ground. She won't watch Channel 4, for instance. He can't stand ITV. She's Protestant. He's Catholic – albeit lapsed. He hates Tony Blair, she likes his hair. All the while, she insists on keeping the mouse costume on. God's orders, she insists.

That, in itself, adds a theatrical charge, and Ireland writes with a pitch black

sense of humour. Dark zingers fly back and forth like double act patter, making a loaded situation all the more fraught and adding real comic crackle to Max Elton's production. Elinor Lawless is superb as the mousey woman, balancing extreme vulnerability with sharp retorts, while Rufus Wright smoothes over the man's violence with charm.

This week of all weeks, days after Harvey Weinstein's abuse came to light, *The End of Hope* has a double-strength punch. It puts male entitlement to the sword – the man's needling refusal to take no for an answer; his insistence on calling the shots. Ireland almost subverts consent: an above-board bonk followed by unreasonable demands. "I'd like you to take the mouse head off," the man purrs – a request that, deep down, conceals a command. When she refuses, he pushes until she gives in. It feels like an aberration – even more so being personal, not merely physical.

Later, he wheedles his way towards sex. "You can't just turn me on and then not have sex with me," he insists, as if there were laws against that. Kneeling, hands out, he almost seems to be begging, but he's not – he's cajoling her, cornering her, veiling his threats. It's appalling precisely because it's so underhand; not quite coercion, but pressure nonetheless. It's repulsive, but the moment he oversteps the slightest mark – losing his rag at another refusal or lurching at her – it's shocking enough to draw gasps. Ireland lets us see that even tiny transgressions are transgressions too far.

Yet, such is his skill, you still warm to the pair of them. Both have their vulnerabilities, and the man – Dermot, a notorious poet – turns out to be hiding behind masks of his own: celebrity, masculinity, liberal morality. In amidst all the labels, and the things that divide them, the two still stand as a symbol of hope. "Everywhere in the world where there's a war about religion, two people from each side should have sex," argues his partner. "We should literally make love and not war." In hook-ups, it seems, there's hope for us all.

Evening Standard **Fiona Mountford**

★★★★

Theatre is having a fruitful time examining the risks we take when we expose ourselves to the intimacy of a new relationship. The superlative *Beginning* at the National does just that and here is another two hander on similar lines, one woman and one man alone on a bare stage toying with the potentially explosive possibility of just being honest with each other.

The End of Hope, however, starts where *Beginning* ends. The first we see of Janet (Elinor Lawless) and Dermot (Rufus Wright) is a heap of motion under the covers of a large circular bed.

They are enjoying some enthusiastic sex and when they pull apart we see that she is wearing a top-to-toe furry grey mouse costume. It's not commented

upon at first. Is playwright David Ireland, best known for hard-hitting Cyprus Avenue at the Royal Court, making a point about accepting differences?

Yes, but not quite in the way we expect. They've met through a website and the post-coital conversation is abrasive.

It quickly transpires that they see things – everything, really – very differently and Dermot is not shy in expressing some tiresomely over-emphatic liberal opinions. Lawless has a wonderful way of debunking them with blank incredulity; Ireland's key theme is the perceptions, preconceptions and errors in judgement we make about others and, most crucially, ourselves.

There are a lot of gear changes for director Max Elton to handle in just one hour, but he steers a confident path through them. Gradually, the masks start to come off – and I'm not just talking about that mouse head.

Time Out
Matt Breen

★★★★

'The End of Hope' begins, appropriately, with an end: the closing stages of coitus between two near-strangers who've met through a dating site and have known each other for the best part of 90 minutes. Only then do they get to know each other. Dermot (Rufus Wright) is a famous, atheistic poet who likes watching worthy documentaries and disapproves of Tony Blair. Janet (Elinor Lawless), by contrast, works in Tesco, drops the odd racist comment, thinks Tony Blair has nice hair – and, on God's instructions, wears a mouse costume.

And so David Ireland's two-hander gathers into a meditation on how attraction can supersede differences in class, religion and politics. As with the playwright's previous works, the Troubles lend a backdrop: it's set in Belfast. But sectarianism, interestingly, is only part of it. That Janet hasn't heard of Dermot because she doesn't watch the highbrow TV channels he appears on seems to say far more about our times than the fact she's Protestant and he's Catholic-born.

Straightforwardly directed by Max Elton around the lone, rumpled bed, if this perambulates a bit over the course of an hour, it's braced by sharp dialogue and two strong performances. (Lawless, in particular, brings fierceness to a role that could have got lost in Manic Pixie Dream Girl territory). And in the end, the play undermines its title; ultimately this isn't about the importance, so much as the ongoing possibility of finding common ground in an identity-fixated age of bubbles, silos and dating-app profiles strewn with 'no Tories' disclaimers.

The Stage **Fergus Morgan**

★★★★

The lights come up. A woman in a giant mouse costume is furiously riding a prostrate man. They climax, then, in thick Belfast accents, have an absorbing, argumentative discussion about ITV, Catholicism, Tony Blair and more. It can only be a David Ireland play.

With *Cyprus Avenue* and *Everything Between Us*, Ireland has earned a reputation as a playwright with an explosive, razor-sharp wit and a keen sense of the absurd. Both are on display again in his gloriously funny new two-hander, *The End of Hope*.

Dermot (Rufus Wright) and Janet (Elinor Lawless) have just Tinder-shagged. He's a renowned poet, champagne socialist and high-profile male feminist. She's a self-conscious, straight-talking shop-worker, who dresses up as a giant rodent just to get laid.

Over a high-powered, hugely entertaining hour, they argue about everything from Ibsen to Big Brother, from New Labour to the Northern Ireland Peace Process. It's a pillow talk Twitter spat, angry, aimless and amusing in equal measure.

It's a slick, spry play, not as shocking as *Cyprus Avenue*, nor as politically engaged as *Everything Between Us*, but flaunting Ireland's talents just as well. He writes exquisitely funny, blacker than black dialogue, and squeezes in astute social commentary as he does so.

Max Elton's bare-bones staging – a co-production between the Soho Theatre and the Orange Tree – is simple and smart, and Lawless and Wright practically sparkle with comic chemistry, but Ireland's superb, wincingly sharp writing is the star. Let's hear more from him, and soon.

Broadway World **Alistair Wilkinson**

★★★★★

Soho Theatre and the Orange Tree Theatre present David Ireland's new play, *The End of Hope*, a revealing rollercoaster where no taboo is left untouched.

When Dermot popped round to Janet's house for a casual hook-up, the last thing he expected was to be greeted by a giant furry mouse. Janet wears this outfit because it's what she feels most comfortable in, and it surprisingly doesn't deter men from sleeping with her.

Janet doesn't want to talk about her husband's death, not because it's hard, but because she killed him. During a rough BDSM encounter she accidentally choked him with a courgette that she bought from Tesco. Oh wait, none of that is true.

It's just a bad joke, something that Janet finds hilarious in telling, whereas Dermot finds it deeply disturbing.

Max Elton's production is outrageous from the very first beat, and never lets up. There's a laugh at every line, and even when there's no text, the audience still giggles. It's that type of play where everything is deliriously funny.

The pair disagree on almost everything. Politics, identity, religion, culture are all up for debate. This results in some heated exchanges, and Ireland digs into the ways in which love and connection are much more complicated in today's society than expected.

Elinor Lawless and Rufus Wright hit every beat correctly, and their quick-fire delivery makes for an exciting energy throughout. The pair work off each other well and the chemistry they share is electrifying.

The play gets weirder as it goes on, and Ireland holds nothing back - this is the most intense hook-up in history. Towards the end the tone changes, and it becomes more serious.

There's that moment when you meet someone for the first time and immediately start planning the rest of your lives together. When you find that special person who's beautiful, stimulating and challenging you have to hold onto them. This is the reality that Janet and Dermot are now facing.

But then, just when it's getting a little too intense, Ireland throws in another joke to lighten it all up, and sends us all on our way. It's wild, deliciously controversial and an unnerving insight into the arbitrary form of modern-day relationships. My favourite play of 2017 so far.