

In Far Over Their Heads: Life at the Pool's Bottom

By [BEN BRANTLEY](#) Published: October 26, 2010 [The New York Times](#)

There they fester on the floor of that empty swimming pool, four men in Speedos, past their prime. Once they were legion, but they have dwindled to these lucky (or unlucky) few, and their days pass in a blur of sun-bleached sameness. Yet after 20 years, they remain gripped by the same fever of anticipation. They are waiting — hold for it — for Odysseus.

Olga Wehrly, as the title character, listening to Niall Buggy, as Fitz, the oldest and most literary of her beleaguered suitors, in “Penelope.”

“Penelope,” the extravagantly imaginative play by [Enda Walsh](#) that opened on Tuesday night at St. Ann’s Warehouse in Brooklyn, is like a dream you might have after too much neat whiskey at a tacky marina bar in the company of bookish Irish sots. This word-drunk production — from the [Druid Theater Company](#) of Galway, Ireland — dares to suggest what it might have been like had [Samuel Beckett](#), instead of [James Joyce](#), decided to reinvent Homer’s “Odyssey.”

Make that a Samuel Beckett who understood the desperate-swinging vibes that a recording of Herb Alpert’s “[Spanish Flea](#)” would automatically set off. And who knew that a villa on the Aegean Sea could be as bleak a cosmic landscape as the blasted countryside of “Waiting for Godot.”

The crises of middle-class men realizing they won’t live forever have become all too familiar in theater, film and television, never mind novels. (Paging Mssrs. Bellow, Updike and Roth.) But Mr. Walsh’s rich and strange contribution to the field is in its own subversive class.

The author of “[The Walworth Farce](#)” and “[The New Electric Ballroom](#)” (both seen at St. Ann’s Warehouse), Mr. Walsh here takes the myths of modern manhood — and their classic roots — and twists them until they disintegrate. True, even at only 90 minutes, this deliciously acted play, directed by Mikel Murfi, can seem long in the telling. And despite periodic explosions of theatrical inventiveness, its luxuriant verbal overgrowth can reach the point of suffocation.

But how many plays these days offer as much to think about as this one does? And by that I don’t mean big, topical subjects, but more elusive, philosophical ones about our attraction to our own annihilation and the nature and limits of language.

Those subjects — annihilation and language — are connected, by the way. Mr. Walsh has an intense, love-hate relationship with words. He is aware, as one of the characters puts it, of “the debris that conversation” leaves behind. And the gorgeous, outlandish sentences and speeches he weaves seem to self-destruct even as they are spoken.

Talking is about all the quartet of fractious, sun-baked men in “Penelope” have to do anymore. And here’s where a little [knowledge of Homer](#) might come in handy. These guys are the last of the legions of suitors who swarmed the house of Penelope after her husband, Odysseus, left for the Trojan War, and they have been sitting at the bottom of her pool, waiting for her to choose among them. As recently as yesterday (or was it the day before?) there were five of them, but then a fellow named Murray offed himself, having been talked into a suicidal state by the bully of the group.

The survivors, a spectrum of masculine types, are assembled in the drained, tiled swimming pool that time forgot (designed with merciless sleaziness by Sabine Dargent, who did the equally unforgiving costumes).

Quinn (Karl Shiels) is the slick-haired alpha bully, given to body-beautiful poses that only enhance our awareness that his 40ish physique has run to seed. He treats the weedy, younger Burns (Tadhg Murphy) as his personal manservant, but you sense a rebellion in the offing.

Then there's the rotund gourmand Dunne (Denis Conway), looking like someone you might spot in a Ramada lounge during convention week. Fitz (Niall Buggy) is the oldest member of the group, and its most literary, toting a big tome that happens to be the collected works of Homer.

These men have homes, and presumably careers, of their own. But the only activity they seem to pursue is waiting. This state of inaction is splendidly summoned in the play's opening, silent moments, in which Burns stares forlornly at a blood-stained wall (remember Murray?) and Quinn, frozen in a Charles Atlas stance, ponders something that is definitely not cooking on a cold barbecue grill. That bit of foodstuff is — wouldn't you know? — a sausage, the last sausage in the house, later described tauntingly by Quinn as "the sausage of our youth."

Even Quinn, you see, has a touch of the poet. He and his three rivals have been flexing their linguistic muscles for years. After all, they need to be limber-tongued to pitch woo to Penelope (the beautiful, silent Olga Wehrly), who emerges at regular intervals to hear their proposals anew.

In between her appearances, the lads joke, scrap, compare mothers and body tone and self-consciously weigh the weight of what they say. They debate the merits of collaboration versus internal warfare, but their behavior reminds us of the savage boys from "[Lord of the Flies](#)." As for their language, it brings to mind that of "Godot," but overfertilized and run amok: idle, ritualistic conversation grown big and wild, like jungle foliage.

How they use that language acquires a new urgency on the day that "Penelope" takes place. The men have all had the same ominous dream the night before (it involves that barbecue grill), and they know what that means. Odysseus is coming home, and they are, in a phrase, dead meat. Unless they can finally talk Penelope into marrying one of them.

Their subsequent suitors' speeches assume different forms, each singularly appropriate to the man delivering it. The actors, all terrific throughout, show their true mettle here. The obvious crowd pleaser is Quinn's climactic presentation of courtship through the ages, which allows him to become both halves of famous historical lovers (Napoleon and Josephine, Romeo and Juliet, Jack and Jackie).

But the soliloquy that most surprises, and the one that most stays with me, belongs to Mr. Buggy's Fitz. Addressing Penelope through a microphone, Fitz begins falteringly, but then he finds his groove. In a whispery voice that always seems about to evaporate, Fitz imagines himself into nothingness, into a world beyond words.

Of course, it's his words that take us into this wordless place. That's the paradox that Mr. Walsh has been chewing on, savoring, digesting and spitting out all through this fascinating, dizzying play.

Penelope

By Enda Walsh; directed by Mikel Murfi; sets and costumes by Sabine Dargent; lighting by Paul Keogan; sound by Gregory Clarke; production manager, Eamonn Fox; company stage manager, Lee Davis. A Druid production, Garry Hynes, artistic director; presented by St. Ann's Warehouse, Susan Feldman, artistic director. At St. Ann's Warehouse, 38 Water Street,

Dumbo, Brooklyn; (718) 254-8779, stannswarehouse.org. Through Nov. 14. Running time: 1 hour 30 min-utes. WITH: Denis Conway (Dunne), Karl Shiels(Quinn), Niall Buggy (Fitz), Olga Wehrly (Penelope) and Tadhg Murphy (Burns).