

Zvizdal review: a remarkable portrait, offering no simple answers

Dublin Theatre Festival: the last inhabitants in the exclusion zone around Chernobyl are like figures in a medieval folktale in this documentary installation

© Fri, Sep 30, 2016, 12:30 | Updated: Fri, Sep 30, 2016, 12:33

Helen Meany

ZVIZDAL (Chernobyl - so far so close) ★★★★★

Samuel Beckett Theatre

A Ukrainian village that has gone back to nature has, at first glance, a timeless beauty. Add to this bucolic scene an elderly couple, bound together over a long lifetime. With their scythes and animals, Pétro and Nadia Lubenoc could be figures in a medieval folktale.

Their archetypal quality is emphasised by three miniature models of them and their homestead, which are magnified on camera and integrated with film footage.

The latest in a series called Holocene, this documentary-installation is made by the Antwerp-based company, BERLIN. Over a period of five years, they filmed this couple, the last inhabitants in the exclusion zone around the former nuclear plant at Chernobyl. Pétro and Nadia were determined to stay in their home, resisting the evacuation that followed the explosion, convinced that they have adapted to the radiation.

With no electricity or water, they subsist on potato soup. When their former neighbours visit them once a year, their loneliness wells up, yet they resist offers to move to the city. More than stubbornness or fatalism, their interpretation of life is clear-sighted and accepting: “What makes you think the grass is greener somewhere else? It is the same everywhere.”

We watch the couple become increasingly infirm, utterly dependent on each other, yet proudly individual. With minimal commentary the film-makers gain access to their thoughts and feelings. Initial concerns about voyeurism and exploitation give way to an appreciation of the deep trust between those behind and in front of the camera.

Slowly and sensitively, a remarkable portrait is created, offering no simple answers to the questions that arise, even the central one of why Pétro and Nadia choose to stay.

“This is how it is,” they say, and in that moment it seems that theirs is not a choice after all, but a necessity.

Until Oct 1

Helen Meany

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