Whenever we wonder about the nature of human nature we invariably turn to criminal behaviour, especially that of predatory serial killers, for speculation and explanation. Are such crimes, especially against children, proof of the existence of evil, or are they manifestations of derangement and illness? And how do our judicial processes - and our personal moral reckonings - deal with such events? In the face of such horrors can we - or should we - forgive? This is the perilous territory of Bryony Lavery’s *Frozen*.

Focusing on the murder of ten year old Rona Shirley, *Frozen* examines the effects of the crime on her mother Nancy, on a forensic psychiatrist named Agnetha Gottmundsdottir and on the man responsible, Ralph Wantage. It is a play that deals with the kind of events which are the staple of crime fiction - especially the Patricia Cornwell, Val McDermid, Minette Walters variety. It also had a grisly topicality, opening as it did at the National Theatre in London in 2002 at the time of the Soham murders of two schoolgirls, crimes for which school caretaker, Ian Huntley, was found guilty.

Bryony Lavery’s aim, not only to match the documentary accuracy of police procedural novelists but find a more enlightened understanding of the criminal make-up, is commendable. But, since the play first opened, its reputation has been marred by serious charges of plagiarism. Lavery has always made known her debts to Marian Partington, the sister of one of the victims of the notorious Fred and Rosemary West, but her very specific use of a lengthy New Yorker profile by Malcolm Gladwell of the psychiatrist Dorothy Lewis on her career investigating serial killers, including Ted Bundy, was not acknowledged. Even in the current State Theatre program, it is still only tangentially referred to. Gladwell’s perspective on the dispute was published in an article in the New Yorker in November last year.

*Frozen* is an ambitious play and a brave one. The tabloid frenzy over the Soham murders, for instance, was ferocious - and a playwright, like any-
one calling for a more measured response when tempers are running high, faces accusations of lack of heart or lack of will. Perhaps it is Lavery’s character, Agnetha who carries this burden. It is she who in the play memorably asks of the crime (in what turns out to be a phrase coined by Malcolm Gladwell !) “is it a sin or a symptom ?”

In this State Theatre production, director Catherine Fitzgerald does much to capture the warmth and humour of Lavery’s writing. In making the unimaginable familiar, the character of the mother, Nancy, is central. Early in the play we see her raking leaves in her garden, nattering about her two daughters and wondering why one is not yet back, oblivious to the nightmare that is to descend on the family. Agnetha, on the other hand, in the very first scene of the play, is having a panic attack and collapses in tears. Crazy Horse is outtahere, she shrieks - and that is our cue, to some extent, for how we view the professionally calm, privately brittle American empiricist. Ralph, is also a stereotype, or at least, close to profile – obsessional, isolated and dissociated, as he clutches his suitcase full of child porn.

The play unfolds at first as a series of monologues, performed in the round, or rather, the square, on Gaelle Mellis’s set consisting of large floor tiles with an abstract enamelled surface that on second glance is very like a mix of earth and blood stains. David Gadsden’s lighting interrogates - and we hear the evidence, the justifications and the pain of the crime.

As Nancy, Carmel Johnson staunchly carries the sadness, bewilderment and anger that we might expect of the mother. The playwright is closest to this character and writes her with self-deprecating humour but also, increasingly, with a kind of Eastenders sentimentality. Unlike the febrile, disconnected, “Icelandic” Agnetha (played with admirable clarity by Annabel Giles) who has the more difficult task of arguing that the criminal is also a victim. This is made more credible by a fine performance by Nick Pelomis as Ralph. In its detail and in Pelomis’s believable shifts from fixations to glimmerings of understanding - especially in the excellent scene with Carmel Johnson in the prison encounter - we get closer to the paradoxes of human monstrosity.

But not as close as the play promises. Lavery’s many digressions build the characters, but they also weaken the drama and the argument. By the end of the ninety minute first half, the play - but not this diligent and absorbing production - has exhausted our curiosiy. It isn’t that we can’t go longer, but that the opportunities for impact are squandered by repetition,
emotional manipulation and a loss of focus. It is not surprising, perhaps, that Bryony Lavery covered her tracks over the Dorothy Lewis connection. It is as though, ultimately, she doesn’t want to hear what she has to say.