Ron Banks

Irish playwright Martin McDonagh’s study of extremism during the Troubles of his native country was considered so violent and offensive that for several years producers shied away from it.

It took McDonagh seven years — and a change in perspective on the Troubles — for The Lieutenant of Inishmore to reach the commercial stage in London.

Written in 1994, before the peace process was fully under way between the political parties, the play was finally premiered by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2001.

It won an Olivier award for its black comedy style, while outraging many people with its stomach-churning gore. When it was performed in New York, critic Ben Brantley from the New York Times described the play's carnage as being raised “to a level that rivals Quentin Tarantino”.

None of this has deterred the WA Academy of Performing Arts from programming the play for its final year students, who will tackle its curious blend of the “gleeful and gruesome” at the Roundhouse Theatre on the Mt Lawley campus.

McDonagh is one of Ireland’s leading young playwrights, best-known for works such as The Beauty Queen of Leenane. Younger audiences may be familiar with the recent film In Bruges, which McDonagh both wrote and directed.

The Lieutenant of Inishmore will be guest directed by David Myles, who says its violence must be seen in the context of the times.

“There is nothing at all gratuitous in the violence, although I suppose some might see it that way,” he says. “It deals very graphically with the violence that has been part of Irish life for such a long time, but McDonagh has such an amazing wit that you will be laughing at his cleverness one moment and then appalled at all the blood being spilled the next.”

The playwright’s focus, says Myles, is on the politics of extremism that developed in the breakaway faction from the Irish Republican Army known as the INLA, which stood for the Irish National Liberation Army.

“The INLA considered themselves purer than the IRA, but in reality were far more extremist in their approach,” says Myles.

The lieutenant of the title, who comes from the island of Inishmore, is the group’s most extreme member — someone so addicted to violent measures that his own comrades are instructed to eliminate him.

To succeed in this aim, however, they have to invade the island and kill the lieutenant’s favourite cat Wee Thomas to flush him out.

“It’s the one thing he loves, which gives you some indication of the extremism involved,” says Myles. “It’s a very confronting play about extremes.

“While the violence is extreme, so is the comedy and the situations the people of Inishmore find themselves in.”

Myles is a seasoned director with 25 years experience in British theatre, beginning in the mid-60s when he arrived from Australia seeking work as a stagehand after a stint in the fledgling television industry.

He worked his way up from stagehand to assistant stage manager and eventually freelance director, working for seven years at the National Theatre at the Old Vic under its artistic director Sir Laurence Olivier.

Working on many acclaimed international productions, he collaborated with directors such as Peter Brook, Ingmar Bergman, Tyrone Guthrie, Jonathan Miller and John Schlesinger.

At one point in his career he worked with the Beatles on the stage adaptation of John Lennon’s book In His Own Write.

Since returning to Australia in 1990, Myles has worked as a freelance theatre director in opera, music theatre, drama and television on shows such as Neighbours and Home and Away.

The Lieutenant of Inishmore is at the Roundhouse Theatre, WAAPA, from June 12-18. Bookings on 9370 6636.