



LITERATURE

Tony award-winning playwright Frank McGuinness talks to Deirdre Mulrooney about his literary journey from Buncrana to Booterstown

# Embracing the unknown

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IT WAS not that happy an experience at secondary school, but university was a tremendous liberation and an insight into the pleasure of learning," divulges an energised Professor Frank McGuinness, coming out of his postgraduate seminar on *Dancing at Lughnasa*

and *Lady Windermere's Fan* for the MA in Anglo-Irish Studies. At the same time as his seminar, just across the corridor in UCD's School of English & Drama, Professor Tony Roche was examining one of McGuinness's own plays with the other half of the class. The paradoxical nature of a creative writer placing himself in a supposed den of critics is not lost on McGuinness. But, then again, for this Tony award-winning playwright, it was this very School of English & Drama, along with UCD Dramsoc and a fortuitous 1980 meeting with Patrick Mason that nurtured his inner artist in the first place.

McGuinness's was a childhood without books "in a working-class estate" in Buncrana, "10 miles from the border, and 14 miles from Derry", on Donegal's Inishowen Peninsula. "I've been making up for it ever since," he jokes, gesturing around his book-cluttered office. "The first book I read was *Pride and Prejudice* — a schoolbook. I absolutely adored it. Then, quite seriously, the second book was *The Castle of Adventure* by Enid Blyton. I loved it! So I'm the bastard child of Jane Austen and Enid Blyton!" However, the 55 year old is all right with that. "I



didn't feel particularly deprived for not having books actually." Curiously, he says the main consequence is that it means he has really no knowledge or appreciation of children's literature.

The eldest of four children, he was "spoilt rotten" by his mother, who worked in the local shirt factory, and his father, who was a bread man (among his earliest plays are *The Factory Girls* (1982), set in a shirt factory, and *The Bread Man* (1991).

"[Playwriting] wouldn't have entered my family's, and my extended family's consciousness actually," he shares. "The big opportunity was the scholarship that came in after Donagh O'Malley brought in free education. I was about 14. It let me get educated at secondary school, college, and let me do a postgraduate degree in medieval studies. I was absolutely determined that if that was up for grabs, I was going to take it. It was the first time anyone in my family had ever really gone to college. We were aspiring to the professions, there was no question about that. Our parents pushed us in that direction — to make the most of your own ability — and to make the most of what few things poor people had at the time."

They may not have had books, but they did have "newspapers and television, which is the great subverter, a wonderful, wonderful source of enlightenment at the time", he says. "From the word go we were taught there was a world beyond this island. That may have done damage to my Celtic standing," he jokes, "but all the more standing for that."

He continues: "I grew up in quite a complex society where the nuance was extraordinarily powerful. And I grew up in a house with a really clever woman, whose main intellectual weapon was words." His plays and modern versions of the classics are littered with strong female characters. "From an early age I was attuned to the barbarity — how to wound through language, and how to charm and lull through language. I drank that in like mother's milk. I think a lot of Irish people have that capacity by reason of the way Irish women operate. They have been so deprived of formal power. Their great outlet was speech, song and laughter."

Offering an example of the Irish-English, English-English and American-English that co-exist in his play *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*, McGuinness attributes his hyper-sensitivity for language to "that social training I had in Donegal. Everything goes back to Donegal, everything. There's no doubt about that".

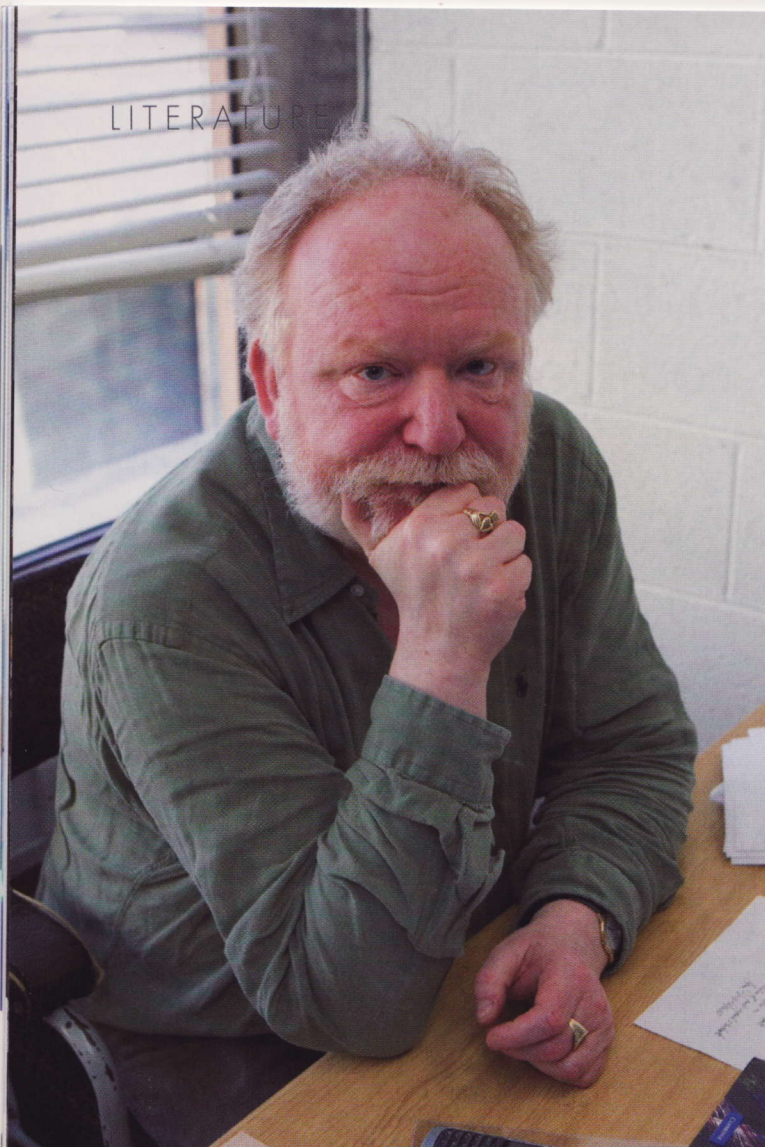
The 1971 transition from the little town of Buncrana to the big metropolis of Dublin was unforgettably traumatic for the budding writer. "It was absolutely heart-wrenching. I knew I wanted to come here, but I was grief-stricken and physically sick for the first year. I understand the meaning of homesick. It took me a year to adjust, or to get some kind of bearings. Then, in second year, I made friends, and was doing English and Medieval English, and I loved it. But the uprooting was so savage that I could never do that again of my own free will. I have been offered a load of things in the US, but I just couldn't go."

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The journey towards his Tony award (for Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in 1997, with Janet McAteer as an unlikely, but brilliant, Nora), and his current standing as one of Ireland's greatest living playwrights was a steady, if unpredictable, one. "When I came to Dublin first, I did go to the Abbey and the Gate. Then, towards the end of university, I got involved in Dramsoc. That was the first-ever, big, active engagement with it." His "big inspiration", Professor Terence Dolan (author of *A Dictionary of Hiberno-English*), fostered a "very deep love of Chaucer". "The medieval influence is in the writing, without drawing too much attention to it." It's no surprise to hear that McGuinness specialised in linguistics, given the extraordinary linguistic sensitivity that informs his writing. His version of Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, which enjoyed a successful run at the Project Arts Centre in February, is a prime example.

McGuinness has developed into a very rare combination: a practical man of the theatre, who is widely respected by actors for the useful notes he can offer to help unlock a character and a performance for them, and an inspirational teacher, who can put his students through a rigorous training and interrogation of the texts he places so strategically on his courses. "I try to teach the plays that I do versions of. That time spent with the innards and the skeleton of the text, things suddenly start to reveal themselves and patterns start to emerge." One expertise informs the other. "You can never lose sight of the fact that, when you are reading a play, your reading is about a physical activity. Your reading is about action, about things happening on a stage. I try to emphasise that an awful lot in the rehearsal





## FRANK MCGUINNESS PLAYOGRAPHY

### PLAYS

- *The Factory Girls* (Abbey Theatre, 1982)
- *Baglady* (Abbey, 1985)
- *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (Abbey, 1985)
- *Innocence* (Gate Theatre, 1986)
- *Carthaginians* (Abbey, 1989)
- *Mary and Lizzie* (RSC, 1989)
- *The Bread Man* (Gate Theatre, 1991)
- *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* (Hampstead, West End, and Broadway, 1992)
- *The Bird Sanctuary* (Abbey, 1993)
- *Mutability* (Royal National Theatre, 1997)
- *Dolly West's Kitchen* (Abbey, 1999)
- *Gates of Gold* (Gate Theatre, 2002)
- *Speaking like Magpies* (RSC, 2005)
- *There Came a Gypsy Riding* (Almeida Theatre, London, 2007)

room, as in the classroom."

Revisiting the classics also refines McGuinness's craft. "It's like a painter, you need to go and look at paintings. Bacon drained Velasquez dry for his own art. It's a wonderful example. This is what artists do. They go and they find out how things work."

However, he shies away from defining creativity. "I don't know what creativity is, or where it comes from, and I don't want to know. I think you cannot possibly make anybody a writer. You can make them a reader. Good reading can lead to good writing," he offers. "There are things, I think, that it is very dangerous to have too logical, or too pat an answer to. I do believe in the tangential. I believe that things can come at you from the most unlikely sources. I like embracing the unknown."

Outside of academia, McGuinness is collaborating with writers, actors and directors. "We are all collaborators, and one of the great reasons for doing these versions is to collaborate — with authors in the past." His "big project" this year is *Oedipus* at London's Royal National Theatre. McGuinness describes *Oedipus* as "this phenomenal, terrifying, heartbreaking play", which is set to star Ralph Fiennes as the tragic hero and will be directed by Jonathan Kent. "My God, Sophocles — the demands he makes of you," McGuinness confides. "He puts you through gigantic challenges."

Putting himself through challenges is clearly something that McGuinness, whose output is prolific, is fond of. He declares an actor's aversion to "resting". "I'm a firm believer in work. I don't like slacking and I don't like holidays. It's not my way. My definition of hell is a beach holiday."

The sea, however, is something he is drawn to. Living in Booterstown, he is never far from it, and it makes perfect sense that *The Lady from the Sea* is also on his desk. He is doing a version of the Ibsen play for his frequent collaborator actress, Lia Williams, this year. *The Stronger*, the short Ibsen-inspired film McGuinness wrote for Williams to direct, was recently nominated for a Bafta award.

McGuinness relishes working in Ireland, and dismisses the idea that it is any different to how it has ever been. "I don't think there is a new Ireland. I just think it's the same old kip, wearing a new dress." Even the notion of credit doesn't strike him as new. "Well, there was always hire-purchase. There was always debt."

Looking forward to sinking his teeth into a new play for the Abbey Theatre in 2009, McGuinness certainly won't have to look far for inspiration: "I think we are still the same, barbaric, rather cruel, rather wonderful, shockingly generous, strange paradox of a place. I wouldn't live anywhere else. As I say, I embrace the unpredictable. That's why I live here."

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