

STEPHEN MURPHY

in a conversation with Bláithín Gallagher, Leitrim Guardian Editor

Stephen Murphy is a poet and a powerhouse of words who lives in North Leitrim. Over the last few years his words have reached and moved multitudes who relate to his sentiments. He is voicing the thoughts of many who feel they have somehow lost their voice, or feel silenced, or are afraid to speak their thoughts out loud. As I watch and listen to Stephen perform publicly I know I am watching something very special, his raw honesty draws one in to achieve a mutual understanding. His passion and power are so obvious it is like watching a battery draining itself of power bar by bar as he moves through the many pieces without a scrap of paper to prompt him. Here Stephen tells me a little about himself, his work and his inspiration.

BG: Hello Stephen, thank you for taking some time out to share your thoughts with our readers at the *Leitrim Guardian*. When did the urge to express yourself *via* poetry develop, and how did you first respond, what make you write in the style you do.

SM: I've been writing for at least the past 15 years, and probably closer to 20 in truth. Poetry always struck me as the most natural form of structurally capturing a thought, but in saying that I've at least a dozen notebooks of prose from India and Nepal alone that I hope to typeset some day when I have the time.

When we came back to Ireland in 2013 I started going to poetry readings and it snowballed from there fairly quickly, from travelling around with Chelsea to open mics. Phone calls started arriving for feature slots at the events and the more they came, the more I wrote.

I always say to people I write in Milltown Wood while out walking the dog which is only a half-truth. The trees are generally the first to hear them when they're done and ready for the world, but for every piece there's at least a notebook of drafts, redrafts



and ideas that go into it. I'll run it over in my head compulsively to find the right word or line, and if it's not right I'll keep searching within until it is. Maybe it helps to be mad, but narrative is hugely important, especially in the longer pieces; you're bringing the audience on a journey and if they can't follow the path you're taking them on it's a bit ridiculous to expect them to go there with you.

BG: How long does it take you (approximately) to get a piece to where you think it is ready for the world?

SM: It varies from piece to piece in terms of time, but 'Was it for this?' took me from September 2013 to March 2014 to finish, and 'Before you push the chair', one of the latest ones, took from last November to this July, which probably seems like an eternity to most people to spend on a poem, but I see it as a craft, and if it's worth doing, it's worth taking the time needed to get it right. It's a strange one, with the flippancy and immediacy of the internet people often seem to think it takes the same six minutes to write it as it does to watch or listen to it, but if I was on an hourly wage for my work



I'd have a new roof on the cottage years ago!
BG: Can you tell me a little bit about how the words come to you and how you trap them?

SM: The seeds of a poem come to me from somewhere else, a place I can't define to be honest, and sometimes I'm just acting as a medium for them to make their way into the world. I remember clearly one night in India waking up and needing to write the birth of a poem called Ériu down, just to capture the first few lines so the rest could follow later:

*'I saw her on Streedagh strand
Etching letters in the wet sand
With a feather that met her hand
Like a pencil fallen from the sky.'*

I found the notebook of the drafts to it a few weeks ago, and from seed to fruition it was a lot of work to get it where I wanted it to be. A friend of mine once said that to him it's like I birth poems into the universe, which was a strange analogy, but maybe fitting. The gestation period varies, the labour is intensive, but when they're ready there's an onus to let them out there to make their own way in the world. You never stop caring about them, but you have to be ready for them to take on a life of their own when they encounter the hearts and minds of others along the journey.

BG: Your work is very much performance based, i.e. the audience can see and hear the passion emanating from your words as you express yourself.

SM: There's a huge difference obviously, and one that consistently breeds a schism between page and stage poetry that needn't exist. There's room for both, and I'd always argue when the divides surface that both are of the same essence; trying to convey a mes-

sage and connect with people in doing so. I've found many who'd consider themselves page poets seem threatened by the phenomenon of performance poetry, as if it's encroaching upon their own audience and in many cases usurping it, but I think part of the evolution of poetry now is a return to the oral narrative tradition that existed millennia before pre-literate cultures. It's come full circle in what could be considered the post-literate era of the internet and mass media, where many would rather wait a year for the next instalment of their favourite TV show rather than spend a week reading a book that's already written.

BG: What difference have you found in the responses from your audience between those who watch you perform and those who only get a chance to read your work?

SM: As for the reactions, I've seen both men and women come up to me in tears after performances, and you're obviously never going to get that from somebody who reads the poems, unless they're sitting beside you when they're reading it and it hits them in the same way. For the most part though there's a remove between an author and an audience, a barrier often deliberately propagated by authors who can consider themselves aloof. I think that's nonsense for the most part, and part of the cultural elitism responsible for the Adrian Mitchell quote 'Most people ignore most poetry because most poetry ignores most people.'

One of the nicest things that's been said to me by people is that they were never into poetry until they listened to my work. I don't see myself as better or worse than anyone, I'm just trying to do what I do to the best of my ability and hoping it might make a difference to people along the way.

BG: Your work is a mixture of social and political commentary, that is, politics with a small 'p', tell me what inspires you to write as you do.

SM: Someone asked me a while back to do an

interview where the first question was; Why is it you write about politics? I felt guilty about not replying for about 5 minutes until I had a nappy to change and then I forgot all about it. I write about life, and life is both social and political. Certainly much of what I've been writing about in the past few years has been about broader social questions, but is it not a duty of the artist to give voice to the voiceless? Sometimes I think that we've become so self-centred that we genuinely think that the world revolves around us, and much of modern art reflects this narcissistic world-view. I think at the root of it we're only the legacy we leave behind, and I hope that when I go somebody might say 'that fella wasn't the worst of them.' I've written poems about my wife, son, and dog, but the more widely known pieces are obviously the more socio-political, probably because those are the issues with the broadest scope.

BG: Can you let me have some excerpts from your poetry which will showcase the variety of your work for our readers?

SM: I'm not really sure about excerpts that would give a flavour of what I'm about, anyone is welcome to just type in 'Stephen Murphy poetry' into YouTube and click on something where you see a green barn, but earlier in the year I was commissioned to write a poem for the Dutch chairmanship of the E.U. on the subject of 'Europe and the Peace'. I found the whole idea hypocritical while European countries are busy bombing the Middle-East, so I decided I'd take that approach to writing it. While I'm perhaps best known for my performance work, some of my own favourites are written mostly for page, between this one and a poem I wrote on the day Rowan came into the world. I recited the poem about Rowan in Cavan at a gig one night and a lady asked me if she could have it as a gift for her husband for Father's Day, so Chelsea designed beautiful artwork to go alongside it, we renamed it 'Sonnet to a New-born', framed it for them and posted it up the road. I'd hope it was fairly well received but I haven't seen the lady since to find out!

What truth is peace?

*If only as a name can it exist
In lands that claim the fallen as their own
Their sweat and toil embodied now in stone
Whose blood met soil and married in the mist
And carried home their triumph or who lay
Where once they fought for all they thought
they'd known
That ebbed away as there they died alone
In fields where cold white crosses mark the clay?
What truth is peace, and who are we that dares
To speak its name as though we would a friend
Are we the same who motion to pretend
That terror came to take us unawares
Or are we bound by life forever more
To sing of peace yet sound the drums of war?*

BG: Tell me about your journey as a spoken word performer and the places it has taken you.

I used to hate the term 'spoken word' until I realised that hating it was giving it an energy it didn't deserve. I'm a poet, and even at that it took me a long time to consider myself comfortable with the term, mostly due to the giants of the past who've borne the title. I'm not really a big fan of labels. When you label something you limit it, and certainly in terms of 'spoken word' I think it's a label designed to keep some poets away from the cultural pie, as if 'spoken word' is somehow a lesser form of literature.

I've had some amazing experiences so far though, labels aside. I've performed across the U.K., in the U.S., across the length and breadth of Ireland and represented Ireland twice abroad, reaching the final of the European Poetry Slam in Estonia last November, and again at the European Parliament in March of this year. I thought that winning the All-Ireland Slam in 2014 might get my name out there a bit more, but it almost proved the opposite, RTÉ wanted nothing to do with me, though nothing has changed there. This year alone though I've been on the Pat Kenny show on Newstalk and Ireland AM on TV3, and the editor of the Sunday Independent asked me to contribute to the Easter Sunday edition of this year's paper. When I sent him

on the text to 'Was it for this?' he sent me a text later to say they weren't going ahead with it. That sort of stuff used to bother me more than it does now, but by the same token all artists crave recognition for their work. Sometimes it's enough to know that they're aware of it.

At this stage I couldn't list off the gigs I've done, but even to think that I've performed in front of crowds ranging from 40-100,000 people on six separate occasions since October 2014 is very surreal. I remember the first big one, when I was asked to perform at the first Right2Water event on O'Connell Street in Dublin. The crowd was so big the march was rerouted around Stephen's Green, and by the time myself and Chelsea were at the bottom of George's Street I got a phonecall from the organisers telling me they were half way through the speeches. We ended up sprinting all the way to the GPO with a four month old Rowan in the buggy out in front. I landed straight up onstage, trying to catch my breath, to speak to a crowd of 100,000+ people. I have the photo from the Sunday Independent on a wall in the house. I saw it doing the rounds online that evening on a tiny screen, but it was only the day after when we went down and saw it on the front page of the paper that I realised it was me on stage when it was taken.

The more I think of it, the more surreal it all becomes, but after every one my routine is always the same; I look forward to sitting down by the footbridge in Milltown Wood to listen to the river for an hour or two to wash it all away. The sound of the river and the energy of the place has always anchored me, and to me (along with the 16 million people who've watched Johnnie Lawson's video of it online!) it's a particularly sacred space.

On Easter Saturday I performed in Liberty Hall alongside Christy Moore, the current chair of Irish Poetry Paula Meehan and Mick Blake amongst others. I've known Mick since I was knee-high to a grasshopper as his wife Mary is a Lurgan woman, and performed with him on several occasions including our album

launch in the Glens Centre in June, but while most reading will know that Mick lives in Leitrim village, they mightn't be aware that Paula Meehan spent a couple of years living near Mohill. I'm convinced everyone has a Leitrim connection somewhere, some just don't know it yet.

For all the talk this year about the centenary of the Poet's Rising, there was something particularly special about delivering 'Was It For This?' outside the GPO on the 24th of April, 100 years to the day since Pearse stood in the same place to read out the proclamation. Things like that never fully sink in, but even now looking back on it a few months on, it's incredible to think that of all the poets on the island I was the only one asked to perform at it. The energy on the street that day was electric, something I'll never forget, and the outpouring of emotions from people afterwards will live with me 'til the day I die.

I've been very lucky to have some of the gigs I've been asked along to, but maybe it's true to say you make your own luck, especially when it's something created from nothing and crafted into something that relates to people. For all the dark days spent writing, moments like that make it really worthwhile.

BG: It seems to me that you have been very busy over the past year. You and your partner Chelsea are raising a son, Rowan up in North Leitrim, near where you were raised! Tell me about the influence Leitrim has had on you? Why did you choose to come back here to live?

SM: Rowan's been the light of our world since he was born in May 2014. He's an amazing little boy and best friends with Wo-Wo, a beautiful, occasionally daft, setter-retriever cross who myself and Chelsea once knew as Luna before Rowan renamed her. The rowan trees were in bloom in Milltown Wood on the day he was born, and I knew he'd grow up to be a child of the forest so his name chose itself.

I love Leitrim. I love the air, the space, the forests, the lakes, the mountains and the wit and inherent warmth of the people. I adore

the place, and the further away from it I got the more I missed it. I love being able to go for a walk at night away from the light pollution of the towns and cities and see the universe above in its glory. There's something deeply spiritual about it, a connection to the land here that roots me in its earth. I think it's the same connection that draws so many artists to the area and keeps them here. Would I be doing what I'm doing elsewhere? Maybe, but the influence that it has on me is huge, and a very proud part of who and what I am, even if I am deeply disappointed by the County Council's decision to blot the county with traffic lights. They really must have no idea how people's faces used to radiate at the thought of a place where traffic lights didn't exist.

It has its downsides obviously, the Dublin centric nature of the country extends to the arts too, but I couldn't be happy living in the city, I need the space to make sense of the words in my head, and if I didn't have that space I'd be lost. The upsides are worth it though, my folks are just down the road from us and I love them to bits, they're amazing with Rowan and incredibly supportive. They'll be 40 years married in January and I know how lucky we are to have them so close. Many people have strained relationships with their parents for a multitude of reasons, but I'm really lucky in that regard to have the respect and love for them that I do, and to have their support and guidance when it's been needed over the years.

BG: Do you have many difficulties trying to balance your rearing of your son, fulfilling your desire to be a full time father with all the travelling that is required as a performance poet?

If we didn't have Rowan I might have the time to transcribe the mountain of notebooks on my bookshelf, but by the same token I wouldn't have the light he's brought to the world and I wouldn't swap that for anything. The notebooks aren't going anywhere but I feel immensely privileged to have the time I have with Rowan, something so many fathers

miss out on. Chelsea and Rowan have been at all but one of the big gigs, and having them there is what it's all about at the end of the day. I just hope when he grows up he sees his daddy as someone to be proud of and he doesn't think I'm a lunatic for doing what I do!

BG: I have had numerous people from all walks of life express their sincere praise of you and your work Stephen, people wondering if I, as editor of the Leitrim Guardian, am aware of your work etc. Our president, himself also a poet, spoke highly of your work recently in the Abbey Theatre. You got a standing ovation. Knowing you Stephen I am certain this has had some sort of effect on you. Can you tell me about it?

SM: Thank you Bláithín, that's very kind of you and them to say so. That was a very special day. A mad one in so many respects, but another I'll never forget. To have the chance to perform in the Abbey Theatre is an enormous honour, but to get a standing ovation afterwards reduced me to tears. It's probably the only time I remember welling up after a performance. (in the safety of the backstage area thankfully), but it was overwhelming. I spent so long writing 'Before you push the chair' and put so much of myself into it that to see it resonate to such a degree, in the National Theatre that Yeats and Gregory established to 'bring upon a stage the deeper emotions of Ireland', was an extremely special moment in my life.

I took the train up on my own, where a man from Longford insisted on explaining the intricacies of microwaving banana sandwiches to me for two hours. The only other person at the event I'd so much as met before was the president so I was completely outside my comfort zone, with a full house of a who's who of Literary Ireland. Everyone else was in a suit so when I showed up in jeans and a t-shirt I felt like a fish out of water before I ever even made it to the stage.

The reaction of the crowd was intense, but when Michael D. veered off script to say 'It's the second time I've had the privilege of

hearing a splendid, courageous and wonderful young poet, Stephen Murphy' to a spontaneous round of applause mid-speech it was a huge honour. The first time I met our president was in Liberty Hall in March, when he came up to me afterwards and gave me a hug to thank me for my words, so if the president approves of what I'm doing I must be doing something right!

I meant to get to the bar afterwards to thank him for his kind words but realised I'd lost my wallet during the day so by the time I made it out he was gone. The wallet showed up later, it turned out I'd traded it for a sandwich on O'Connell street hours before the gig, but fair play to the lads in the shop for having it there for me when I went back. I'd never thought I'd see it again, but it was a fitting end to a magical day.

BG: What are your hopes for your future as a poet? Where would you like to see yourself in five years?

SM: I was asked a while ago by a friend what my intent was. The answer is always simple. All the videos I've put up online are recorded up at the barn at a place we've come to call Inis Ciúin, the quiet island. It's home, where I envisage living and writing for as long as I can. At the moment the cottage is gutted, needs a new roof and to be completely renovated so we're living down in the village of Lurganboy. My dream is to light the fire in the cottage on the first evening we move in, knowing that it was staying true to the path that brought us there. It's certainly a road less travelled, but so many people spend a lifetime looking forward to a time when they can pursue their ambitions, and that time never arrives. I'm currently spending a lifetime pursuing my ambitions in the hope that the time when I no longer can, never arrives.

If you'd asked me five years ago where I'd see myself now, I could never have envisaged that I'd have seen the stages and places I have. A few years ago I met a Sadhu in India who looked into me and said 'If you give yourself to the universe, it will light your way.' Since



coming back that's what I've tried to do; to listen to the energies of the island and do my best to work through the collective darkness to find hope. It won't always be everyone's cup of tea, but some people like sugar and some people don't.

My immediate hope is to find the time to put another book together, there's so much material that exists only either in my head or in various notebooks around the house that I feel that I should look into collecting it soon. Rowan's reaching a stage now where he's starting to question the merits of napping in the afternoon though, so where that time will come from is anyone's guess!

BG: Thank you Stephen for sharing some of your story with me and our readers!

Thank you for asking me Bláithín, it's been a mad ol' journey over the past few years and hopefully it's still got a way to go yet!

You can find out more about Stephen Murphy and his work at www.facebook.com/thesleepingwarrior