

# Drumkeerin Drama Deeply Rooted in Tradition

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"YOU'RE A LONG time involved in drama". An elderly lady remarked to me recently, before adding, "it must mean a lot to you". Before I could answer, "yes it does", she was gone.

Growing up in Ireland, when almost every parish had a play ready to "tour" come Lent, the six weeks when dances were banned, one was bound to catch the drama bug. Although I was but a small boy in the 1940s and 50s Ireland and living in Fenagh, I can vividly recall and relive the excitement we all shared around the open hearth fire as the exploits of actors in the local drama groups were spoken of in awe. We were most fortunate that Eliz Anne O'Rourke, a leading actor in the Fenagh troupe productions, was a family friend and a frequent visitor. So on her visits to our house she used to carry the excitement and buzz that went with the rehearsals and stage productions. An added bonus for me, was that my young teacher Miss Kilcoyne, was playing the part of Betty Smith in "Wigs on the Green". That was 1949.

Is it any wonder then that "Wigs on the Green," "Banns and Plans," "A Damsel from Dublin" and "The Rael McCoy", plays staged by Fenagh with Eliz Anne O'Rourke always playing the leading lady, remain alive in my memory?

I was most fortunate that the Lenten dance ban still existed when I came to Drumkeerin in 1967 and that there was a very active Drama Group and the annual play production was very much alive. That spring they had put on the "Year of the Hiker" with memorable performances by Jim Hazette (RIP) as the Hiker. That



November, I started rehearsing my first play in Drumkeerin, "Home is the Hero". In that production was the great performer, Johnny Gallagher RIP.

■ **'Dillon's American Wake' (2014)** Martina McNiffe, Tommy Drugan, Áine Bohan, Andrew Redican and Joseph McNiffe. *(In rehearsal)*

Although the Lenten dance ban was lifted some years later the annual play has continued to be part of the yearly calendar in Drumkeerin, one of the few

■ **Youth Drama: 'Jealous Heart Stop Beating' (2013)** Nicole Brolly, Rachel Fee, Marisa McGovern, Beth Waters and Keith O'Donnell



parishes where the tradition has lived on to this day, staging drama productions and encouraging youth to get involved, by running Youth Drama Workshops.

That so many people can rhyme off plays staged by Drumkeerin Drama Groups, going back as far as 1940s, indicates how important the annual play productions were, and still are for them. Indeed our exiles carried that love and memories with them. When Drumkeerin Drama Group brought its production "Widows' Paradise" to New York in February 2010, it was a moving experience to witness the emotions and memories roused and rekindled with the staging of the play in St Barnabas High School Chapel Auditorium, The Bronx.

For those of us involved it was an unforgettable experience to see the doors being closed, with over 750 in the auditorium, and a long queue of disappointed people turned away. It was a momentous occasion to see and feel the joy and appreciation of the audience as it rose to accord a standing ovation. Then, as they milled around each of us, so many of them spoke with such clarity and affection about plays they had been at in Drumkeerin before they emigrated. The emotions carried over into the day, following the performance. A group of us were stopped by two elderly ladies, as we walked up McClean Avenue, Yonkers, to tell us how much they enjoyed the play, thanking us for bringing it to them, and adding how it revived for them such wonderful memories of plays they had seen back home in Ireland. That love for the local play is as enthusiastic as ever in Drumkeerin and surrounding parishes. Each year we marvel at the numbers of strangers that come to our plays. Many of them have spoken that there is something special that they experience in Drumkeerin Community Centre; the ambiance, the intimacy shared, the communion between the stage performance and the audience. That resonates onto the stage. Thus it is a joy and



privilege for members of Drumkeerin Drama Group to bring the annual stage production to such appreciative audiences, for as Stanislavski, the great Russian actor director and tutor wrote: "To play to a large and sympathetic audience is like singing in a room with perfect acoustics. The audience constitute the spiritual acoustics for us. They give back what they receive from us as living human emotions".

It is perhaps such human emotions that has inspired *Drumkeerin Drama Group* to consolidate its position in the community with many new developments. To enhance play productions, the stage has been extended in the Community Centre. New lightings have been added. Comfortable seating has done away with the hard chairs in the auditorium. One of its members went off to study for two years with Smashing Times Theatre, Dublin and University College, Dublin, qualifying with an honours Diploma in Community Drama Facilitation skills. These skills he brings into the Youth Drama Workshops. With the encouragement of the group, and the play going community, we have had three full length plays written by a member of the group, which Drumkeerin Drama Group has staged to much acclaim. A number of charitable causes have benefited from proceeds from drama productions.

■ **'Say Cheese' (2013) Andrew Redican, Joseph Walpole, Donna Keaney, Margaret O'Rourke (RIP), Joseph McNiffe, Paula Loughlin & Ethel McVeigh.**

■ **(Below) 'Widows' Paradise' (2010) Paula Loughlin, Margaret Hamilton, Packie McPartlan & Seamus Gallagher.**

Now as we watch, almost helplessly, the fabric of rural Ireland ceaselessly unravel, it is consoling to see that Drumkeerin Drama Group continues to play such an important role in the social life of Drumkeerin and surrounding areas. It is deeply routed in a tradition that goes back almost a century. Long may thespian flames light up the imagination and creativity to inspire actors to enthral and entertain; and audiences to be entertained, applaud and appreciate.

