

He Means a cabstand

Lionel Gallagher

AROUND ST PATRICK'S Day 1989 I was in St Louis, Missouri, playing "Joxer" in Sean O'Casey's "Juno and the Paycock". A cultural group from that city had seen us when we performed the play in Sligo's Hawks Well Theatre and had invited us over for their Festival Season. Members of their group agreed to host our cast and I was billeted, along with "Captain Boyle" (the late Eddie McDermottroe) in a luxury home in a leafy suburb of that Gateway City on the Mississippi.

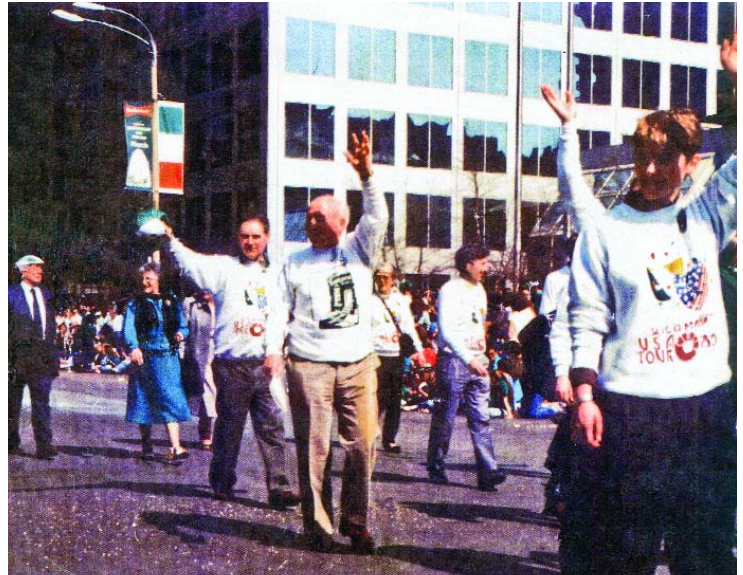
We were wined, dined and feted like VIPs but we also had to work hard to promote the play and adjust the blocking to the peculiarities of the stage in the Sheldon Theatre. Judging from the advertisements in the city's main newspaper, the St Louis Post-Dispatch, there were three other shows in the local theatres apart from "Juno". Victor Hugo's "Les Miserables" was at the Fox Theatre, "Noises Off" by Michael Frayn at the Repertory Theatre and a new musical "Baby" was playing at the Dollar Building as a production of the Theatre Factory of St Louis. A columnist in the paper was proud that his city was running stage shows written by a Frenchman an

Englishman, an American and an Irishman all in the same week! But ours was the only one that offered an "Afterglow Party with the cast after each performance — Refreshments Served", all for 10 dollars extra!

On the morning of our opening night I slept late and found myself alone in our host's house in the suburb of Clayton. Seeing a card with a taxi number by the phone, I called for a car to take me down town. As the sun was shining, and the snow that lay on the ground when we arrived had all melted away, I did not bother to take an overcoat or hat. I felt really free as I went shopping for some gifts to bring home. It was a delight to saunter around the Shopping Mall with so many enticing outlets. The St Louis Centre had over one hundred and fifty shops on four floors with a twenty storey building attached. The floors were linked by open escalators and a glass elevator. Such an experience was not to come to Sligo until the 21st Century.

Keeping an eye on the time, I went to the Mall Exit to set out for the theatre. To my horror the rain was coming down in torrents on the street outside. It was rain like I had never seen before, not even in the worst excesses of a Sligo January.

Just next to the Exit was a Café-Bar so in I went and ordered a coffee and a doughnut. When I told the friendly Bar girl my problem about getting to the Sheldon, she offered to "call a cab" for me. She went to



■ Leading St Patrick's Day, St Louis, 1989 (From Left): Walter MacDonagh, Ita McMorrow, Séan Burke, Eddie McDermottroe, Ann McDermott, Lionel Gallagher, Yvonne Curran and Martin Keaveney (Sligo Borough Council).

a phone and dialled number after number but came back to apologise and to admit failure in her task. "This is not a cab city, Sir", she said. "All the cars are taken. The offices are closing about now and nobody wants to go out in the wet".

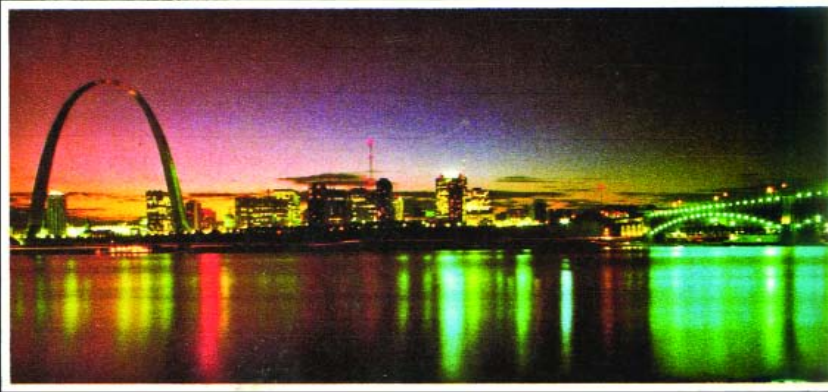
I asked her where I could find the nearest Taxi-rank but she looked absolutely blank. "I don't understand what you mean, Sir", she said. I tried to explain but was getting nowhere until a beer-drinker intervened. "I think he means a Cab-stand", he said, but nobody at the counter seemed to know where such a thing could be found. I asked the Cab-stand man where I could get a bus to the Sheldon Theatre but all he could say was "I'm sorry, Sir, but I am not familiar with the public transport in the city".

I thanked my audience and went back to the Mall Exit which held dozens of people sheltering from what was now an absolute

Sligo Drama Circle
presents
Direct from Ireland

✿ Juno & the Paycock ✿
A tragicomedy by Irish playwright Sean O'Casey
Thursday, March 16* & Friday, March 17*
8:00 p.m.
✿ at The Sheldon ✿
3648 Washington Avenue
Admission \$15.00 per person

Tickets available at Ticketmaster, Brandt's Gourmet Market, Left Bank Books and The Sheldon ticket office
*After Glow Party with cast following both performances.
Refreshments served. Admission \$10.00 per person.
✿ For information call The Sheldon at 533-9900 ✿



reflections on the Mississippi River ST. LOUIS

down-pour. I asked one of those seeking refuge where I could get a bus and was surprised when his answer echoed that of the man in the Bar; "I'm sorry, Sir, but I am not familiar with the public transport in this city."

I was growing desperate by now and I rushed into a Card shop beside the Bar. Here the proprietor gave me exactly the same reply; "I'm sorry, Sir, but I am not familiar with the public transport in this city."

Suddenly I saw the light. Up to now everyone I had spoken to had been white. I approached the nearest black man and told him of my dilemma.

"Follow me, Sir", he said as he produced a large umbrella. I just about managed to keep up with him as he sped around two

■ **Director Walter McDonagh with Lionel Gallagher (who played Joxer) in Sligo Drama Circle's — 'Juno & the Paycock' which played on St Patrick's Day in St Louis, Missouri USA. Photo: Ita McMorrow**



corners and stopped at a bus stop. Here he parked me under an awning that was still in place since the earlier sunshine.

"Your streetcar will be along real soon", he declared as he disappeared before I could thank him.

As good as his word, a bus pulled in and I got on board. My first shock was that the driver was an enormously fat black lady. The second was that I was the only white passenger, most of the others being women with bulging shopping-bags. But the third was a real shocker. When I asked for a ticket to the Sheldon Theatre the driver had never heard of it. She put the problem to her seated charges but nobody had an idea where it was. I had often heard of "Hamlet without the Prince" but I could not imagine "Juno and the Paycock" without "Joxer" on opening night!

I'm convinced it was my guardian angel who gave me the saving prompt. I remembered that the Sheldon was almost next-door to the famous Fox Theatre that was playing "Les Miserables" that night. All on board knew exactly where the Fox was located. Built in 1928, it had been the second largest Picture House in the US with

5060 seats. Restored and reopened as a venue for Musicals, it was one of the wonders of St Louis. I was the darling of the bus for a journey of about two miles.

When we stopped at the junction of Lindell and Grand the whole bus chorused, "here yo are", and wished me all the best for opening night. The rain had eased and I walked up Washington Avenue to Number 3648. At the stage door of the red-brick Sheldon, described in the Guide Books as an "acoustically felicitous auditorium", I was met by the Theatre Manager. He told me that the cast was beginning to get anxious about me. There were no mobile phones in those days although car-phones were a big novelty in St Louis when we were there. When I explained my late arrival to the manager he said, "You should have called me and I would have sent the theatre car round for you!" We had come a long way from Sligo Drama Circle and the Hawk's Well.

But all's well that ends well and the play was a big success with a standing ovation from the capacity audience of 740. I will never forget the next morning at breakfast when a woman from the organising committee burst in with copies of the St Louis Post-Dispatch. She hugged both Captain Boyle and myself and blurted out "Both of you are Stars". Joe Pollack, the paper's chief critic had written a rave review and the Captain and Joxer were included in his "standouts".

O'Casey has Captain Boyle ask "What is the stars?" to which Joxer replies, "Ah, that's the question Captain, that's the question." But the question on that opening night could very well have been "Where is the stars" of the show had it not been for the black citizens of St Louis. I'm sure they had more than a little influence in placing my hopes on Barack Obama as he became leader of his country in making it to the White House, not on Washington Avenue but in Washington D.C.