

The Last Word

Gus Ward & the Corn Mill Theatre Group



...and the environs of Carrigallen are far from Howth Castle. Rather they are very much of Leitrim just as the Guardian has been a necessary part of Leitrim for many years now. However when Dr. Bláithín Gallagher asked me to write a piece for this year's Leitrim Guardian under the heading "The Last Word" my immediate reaction was this should not be happening. I thought, surely a lady is always entitled to have the last word. When I enquired of her what on earth I would write about she referred me to Brendan Harvey's excellent article in last year's edition. I read it again and marvelled at the number of functions he attended as Leitrim Person of the Year. He certainly proved to be a great Ambassador for both the Leitrim Guardian and the county, and clearly worthy of the honour bestowed on him.

As our award was for the Corn Mill Theatre Company rather than an individual, the demands on any one person were less pressing. The fact that the award embraced everyone involved with the theatre was a very important element of it however. As a member of a group as big as the Corn Mill, it would be very easy for any individual to feel that they are merely a small cog in a big wheel, that their contribution is insignificant. Nothing could be further from the truth however, as it is the sum of all parts no matter how small that ensures the success of the whole, and the honour

embracing every member underlined this. This has been the case throughout the history of theatre in Carrigallen.

We can date productions back to 1918, with a performance of the 'The West's Awake'. My memory does not quite stretch back that far, my history with it starts in 1963. Throughout the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and the noughties there were many players and parts, some small, some large some leaving the stage early and quickly others staying longer and having the last word. Those who departed last often defined the playwright's intentions.

Some parts of those periods were dark for Leitrim with migration and recession, others boomed with Celtics Tigers and people returning home. It was a period of change for the theatre and Carrigallen and Leitrim with every decade seeming to close the door on every other. Throughout this the theatre was a part of life in Carrigallen, prospering when it prospered, having its greatest successes.

This year, we had a very successful year again. Our festival show was "The Seafarer" by Conor McPherson directed by Sean McIntyre. The cast was as follows:

Sharky – Ray Hackett, Richard – Brian Reilly, Ivan – Ronan Ward, Nicky – Stephen Gray, Mr. Lockhart – Killian McGuinness. Back stage personnel were: Stage Manager and Setting – Paul McIntyre, Lighting – Philip McIntyre and Edel McIntyre, Sound –

Eamon Daly, Daniel Mimna, Tiernan O'Rourke and Barry Nash, Costume and Makeup – Una Ward, Stage Crew – Jonathan Finnegan, Eugene Finnegan, Noel Doonan, Tiernan O'Rourke & Damien Reilly. Production Photography & Programme Design: Tony Fahy; Poster Design: Ronan Ward

The show was very well received at home, and had a very successful run on the festival circuit, winning the premier award at the following festivals: Ballinamore, Kiltyclogher, Cavan, Carrickmore and Ballyshannon. The director and cast won a number of awards, as did the backstage crew for setting and lighting. This ensured that we were the leading qualifiers going into the National Finals in Athlone. Getting to Athlone is the objective of every group competing in the open section at the thirty six festivals throughout the country. Only nine groups can achieve that however, so getting to Athlone is an achievement in its own right.

Having got there of course hope springs eternal that the National crown will be lifted and brought home in Triumph. There are groups there every year however, who have never had that experience. In 1998 the Corn Mill won its first all Ireland open after many years of competing; this wasn't the last word for drama in Carrigallen. In 2005 we also won. That period for Carrigallen, Leitrim and Ireland was one of change. Villages got bigger and migration turned to inward direction with Leitrim being sprinkled



Final Bow on the last performance of *The Seafarer* in the Corn Mill Theatre. May 2012. Written by Conor McPherson. Directed by Sean McIntyre.

Left: Killian McGuinness, Stephen Gray, Raymond Hackett Brian Reilly & Ronan Ward.

with many new residents and accents enriching it culturally too. Unfortunately as we now know it was not the last word on economic change.

Having been lucky enough to have won in Athlone on two occasions makes it easier to shake someone else's hand in their moment of triumph. This year's victors were Kilmeen Theatre Group from West Cork, who are good friends of ours. We have been competing against each other since the nineteen seventies when we were both in the confined section. This was their second win, so honours are even between us. They like ourselves have their own purpose built theatre, and are a very experienced and accomplished company.

While competition is very keen and having got there everyone wants to win the All Ireland, never the less there is very good camaraderie between all the groups. These last few years have not been the greatest for many in Ireland but in Athlone on Final night, whether it is during 'Celtic Tiger' or 'Recession', gloom doesn't have the last word. When the winners are announced, it is always "a night til morning" as the old saying goes, as members of all groups celebrate with the

winners whoever they are. There is a lot more than winning awards to being involved in the theatre. There is the personal challenge, and if successful the ultimate satisfaction of interpreting the authors intention, and breathing life into words on a page. There is the thrill of experiencing the audience reaction, whether happy or sad. An experienced actor never has to be told whether a show is going well or not, when they come off stage. Instinct tells. For the backstage crew there is also the knowledge from audience reaction, whether the set, lighting and sound effects are working.

Apart from the show at all, there is the camaraderie of kindred spirits, and the cementing of new relationships. There is the joy of meeting old friends and making new ones. There is a good social side to the drama festival circuit, just as there is to the sporting activities that people are involved in throughout the country. Like all the best community activities theatre just like sport is not about the beginning and end or the final whistle, it may go up or it may go down but most importantly it goes on. There is no end, the last word from one play leads us to the

opening lines of the next.

It is hard to believe that another year has slipped away since we met in the county town for last year's launch. We are naturally looking forward to this year's function in our own neck of the woods. As you read time will have elapsed, and the Leitrim Person of the Year for 2013 will have been announced and in situ. I have no idea at this point in time who it will be, but whoever you are I wish you well. I hope you enjoy the experience as much as the members of the Corn Mill did last year. I don't know what this year will bring for them or for Leitrim but in 40 years of my involvement with Theatre and living in Leitrim, the past has had no lock on the future. We have seen many different times, there is no last word on where we go, we continue up and down, so lets choose to believe its upward and believe that final sentiment if not the final word is hope.

Being nominated for *Person of the Year* or *People of the Year*, by ones fellow county men and women is a great honour indeed. It is enshrined forever in the history of county Leitrim, and is something to be cherished and indeed proud of. Having had that uplifting and joyful experience last year as a member of the Corn Mill Theatre Company, I feel there is only one word suitable as my last, and that is "Thanks"

However all last words are '*commodious vicus of recirculation back*'...