

## DERMOT HEALY'S HIDDEN GEM

*Lionel Gallagher*

**DAVID CAMERON**

**YOUR DEATH**

i.m. Dermot Healy

I dreamt there was a rustling outside:  
 Opened the door and saw a dead blackbird  
 Hover, an inch in the air, and then twitch.  
 How could a dead bird do that? It was a wire;  
 Under a wing, working it, a wire  
 - Which I unhooked  
 And held one-fingered, like a fishing-line,  
 And followed to its source. The source was you  
 High on a hill, not rooting among stones  
 At your Atlantic-battered, bulwarked home.  
 'You see,' you said, 'I outsmarted you all.'  
 Not I you, but you had reeled me in.

It was the next day, Dermot, that I heard.

**A**S I WRITE I am conscious that a year has passed since the untimely death of author, poet, stage director, actor and playwright Dermot Healy. Many eminent people in the Arts World have written in praise of his works; his prose from *'Banished Misfortune'* to *'Long Time No See'*; poems from *'The Ballyconnell Colours'* to *'A Fool's Errand'*; plays, especially *'The Long Swim'* for Acorn and his adaptation of Lorca's *'Blood Wedding'* for Sligo's first professional company, *'Seven Woods'*. His work in nurturing the young actors of Acorn for the Hawk's Well Theatre and his creative

input towards editing *'The Drumlin'* and *'Force 10'* journals have all been highlighted, as have his encouragement of budding writers groups like *'The Pig Executive'*, *'The Barrel Store'* and others.

But there was another side to Dermot. He devoted himself to fostering creativity in unlikely places; his work with the young, those on the margins of society, the unemployed and even the unemployable should not be forgotten. I had met Dermot for the first time when he brought his all-Ireland winning play,

Beckett's *'Waiting for Godot'* to Sligo. I did not meet him again until I was on a panel interviewing him for his job with Acorn, the Hawk's Well Theatre's young actor project.

Soon Dermot was also devoting endless hours introducing theatre and creative writing to young people from a regional youth group, the *Markievicz Centre for the Unemployed*. With them he established the *'Dole Q Company'* and toiled tirelessly in the writing, rehearsing and production of a play that will live long in the memories of all those involved. He inveigled

experienced actors into his project and eventually it was ready to appear in Sligo's Town Hall; not on the theatre stage but in a large, bare, downstairs room. I was asked to review it for *'The Sligo Champion'* and I was blown away by what I witnessed.

I don't think it ever saw the light of day after its short run and never have I seen or heard of it apart from the *Champion* review. But if Dermot had never done anything else he deserved a place in the Hall of Fame for this work with script, cast and crew. I was pleased that Dermot approved of what I wrote and I was invited to the 'wrap' party in a High Street bar, another never to be forgotten experience!

*Here is the only record of this particular work of Dermot as far as I am aware, Sligo Champion 7th August 1987.*

**Here and There, and Going to America**

Sligo has more theatre per square inch than almost any equivalent town in the world but rarely does it see a totally new work written by Sligo-based people and brought to life for the first time on a Sligo stage. Last week, thanks to Dermot Healy, the Dole Q Company and the creative talents of members of the Youth Contact Centre, 'Here and There and Going to America' came alive in the Town Hall. The play, consisting of sixteen short scenes, presented in the round, brought

the spotlight to bear on the lives of its two central characters – refugees from the Sligo Labour Exchange, no hopers to many but with an ambition to get to the United States to fly the nets that bound them to their native town. Skilfully played by Gerry Marshall of the Acorn Company and Robert Boyton, they brought us with them through their escape route to Britain, only to find a stronger net with a finer mesh in the squats, hostels and dole offices of London.

It was inevitable that the US was out of reach and we see them at the end of the play in a never-ending line drawing the dole – the celtic serpent swallowing its own tail as the head of the old line joins the end of the new.

Director Dermot Healy did a very clever linking job in connecting the scenes by using the Brechtian device of a silent narrator, a wino played by Acorn's Martin Dolan, with cards giving the scene titles while a very disciplined production team rearranged the set. This worked brilliantly, not least because of Des Braiden's excellent Show Cards.

With such a large cast and so many scenes it was inevitable that we could have some unevenness in the acting and in the impact of the pieces. The more experienced players tended to stand out but the energetic raw talent of the others made the whole an entirely effective evening.

Old hands like Sydney Bernard Smith, Joe Meehan and Gerry McEvoy made the London Hostel scenes come to life. Ronan McDermott and Susan Rowland were excellent as the hippy couple who intro-

duced our heroes to the squat and drugs scene and it would be hard to beat the timing and delivery of Anthony Monaghan's exhortation to get a move on when the Dole line was being held up! Patrick Mabuyaki was the quintessential black railway porter while Fionnuala Gallagher (Acorn) and Eysha Kivlehan created very real, disturbed complex characters as the Cavan girls in the squat.

Graham Hynes as the typist, Timmy Newell and Sarah Cleasby as the dole officers and Aquinas Gallagher in a variety of roles all added to the authenticity of the production. Smaller roles were well played by Sarah Jane O'Hara, Carol Scanlon, Noel Gallagher, Christina Clerkin, Trevor Ferguson, John Foley, Michael Armstrong, Maureen McLoughlin, Siobhan O'Dea, Martin Crosbie, Patricia Martyn and Tony Conway with his live ferret!

Writers Dessie McMorrow, Ronnie Gallagher, Noel McKenna, Siobhan Clerkin, Andy Flynn and Martin Healy deserve special mention as does the production team of Mick Flaherty, Ursula Smullen, Susan McKay, Barry McKinney, Conor Clarke and Bertie Melly.

This was a play that deserves to be done again and again and not only in Sligo. Government Ministers, Clergy, Education- alists, Social Workers, Do-Gooders and Social Welfare officials need to see it – not just for the content, important as that is, but to see at first hand the potential of so many of our young people that is there to be developed. But above all, this is a play that can stand up for itself - I would have hated to have missed it." It is appropriate that the last name on the

list of writers is that of Martin Healy. Martin was probably the most successful of Dermot's protégés from the Markievicz Writers Group. Unfortunately he did not live long enough to fulfil his huge potential. Dermot wrote a generous and laudatory foreword to Martin's published book of short stories 'Waiting for Billy'. Under Dermot's guidance Martin made what Dermot called 'the selfish leap from reading to writing' which later won him two Hennessy awards. I'm sure both Healys have teamed up again by now, having been welcomed by what they referred to as 'the Librarian in the Sky'.

## MICK GEELAN

For Dermot  
**THE POET**

Writer, poet, mentor, friend,  
The night I met you, in Barry's pub,  
You were flying home with Jimmy Folan  
And leaving your wings by the fire to  
I asked you to hone my writing skills  
But you had limited success.

I told you that I made you a dresser  
And you got me to paint your kitchen.  
I tried to get the painting right, while  
We shared a glass of your wine.  
We talked and laughed, discussed  
writing and writers,  
And you made soup in the evenings.

The wild geese had come and gone  
The next time I did your painting,  
And even though your armchair  
Had grown bigger around your frame  
I never once thought I was doing it  
For your funeral.