

# THE DEVIL IN THE DETAIL!

## THE DEVIL'S CÉILÍ

PHOTOS BY TONY FAHY

*The Corn Mill Theatre Group, RTE All-Ireland Drama & Abbey Theatre Award Winners 2014*  
**Ronan Ward, Director**

LIKE ALL GOOD Irish stories this one started in the pub. *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann* had returned to Cavan town and I was deep into a five night run with *The Gonzo Theatre Group* in Cavan Town. Philip Doherty and fellow Cavan man Kevin McGahern had just written a new piece of theatre and Philip had gathered a number of his friends together to put on a performance in a local warehouse. At the after show party I mentioned in passing to Philip that I'd love to introduce this new script to the *Corn Mill Theatre Group*, to take it onto the regional festival circuit and in turn open his work up to a whole new audience. It was midnight, noisy and we were on a high after the show. Philip needed time to think. I needed another pint. It was a full twelve months before we talked again on the subject and I was finally able to impress upon him that this would be something really special for all involved. At our groups AGM in August 2013, I proposed myself to direct this new script for the forthcoming year to the groups members and to their credit I was successful in my pitch.

From the outset I was very mindful of what productions we had produced previously and more particularly who had proceeded me. From Fr Patsy Young, Cathal Farrelly, Killian McGuinness, Seamus O'Rourke, Sean McIntyre and of course the biggest influence in my life, my dad Gus Ward. I had rather large shoes to fill. Absolutely must not mess this up. I remember one day, very early in the process talking to Brian O'Reilly and how, after he read the script, he thought it was huge challenge to undertake.

I remember him saying repeatedly, as if to gently remind me that this wasn't going to be easy and that without directly saying it, this carried a certain weight of respon-

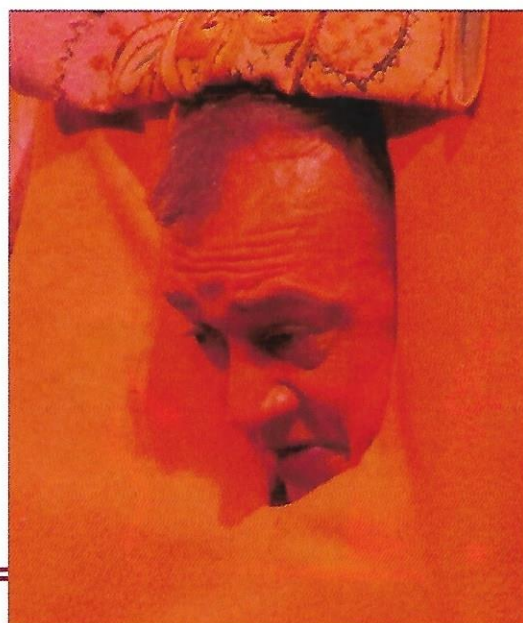
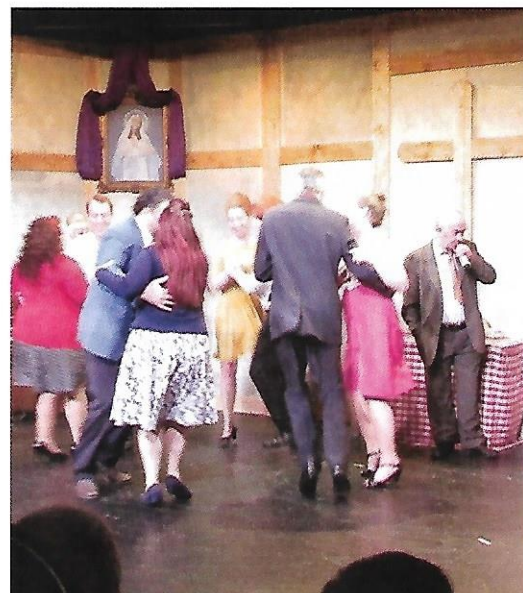
sibility. I understood what he meant but I wasn't too daunted. Thankfully I was able to share this weight and Brian was someone who along with Killian and Gus were the perfect folly to my ever changing queries on how the play should progress. My three wise men if you will. But I was however very much my own man and I set out in my own mind from the start how I wanted this production to evolve. I wanted everyone to enjoy the whole experience of what we were going to do. I wanted it to be an inventive, fast paced and energetic production, full of surprises and detail. It had to bounce along from scene to scene and I did, from the outset believe that we as a group could achieve great things with this play. I had that belief. I guess as director, I'll be honest enough to say I wanted my production to be the best thing anyone had ever seen in our theatre. I wanted everyone talking about it.

*I wanted to make my mark!*

### Casting

Picking a cast is probably the most painstaking part of the production experience. My dad always remarked that; 'you're only as strong as your weakest link'. I was very mindful that I needed to get this show cast correctly. Now, in a perfect world that can be done in a night, in reality it took weeks to get everyone on board, with one or two nights where my wife Orla will testify, I felt like I would never get this off the ground as, for one reason or another, potential actors bowed out due to the weight of commitment involved. But thankfully as some doors shut others opened and I guess sometimes it all works out for the best.

Part of the fun of trying to direct a large cast (we had 23 in total at the final





count), is introducing new people to the group. Compete strangers can meet, as happened this year, and by night two they were quickly immersed into the gang. One new member this year remarked how easy she found it to join, how quickly she was welcomed into the fold and immediately made part of the crew. For our group that's very important, our biggest strength as an organisation is the ability to continually introduce new talent to the group, in essence it will ensure our continual survival. Regardless of age, background or religion we are all embracing and as long as you are willing to give of your time freely, you'll be made very welcome. You also have to have a sense of humour. Humour is very important, as is a thick skin.

### Rehearsals

We started rehearsals in early October with two scripts and the opening scene with two actors; Ray Hackett and Belturbet's Derek O'Reilly. Once November arrived we introduced the remaining cast members and after three months with the full cast in place, the majority of the lines were off and we were ready for phase two after the Christmas break.

The months of January and February are always dark and pretty miserable, not much on the telly except for the *Champions League*. It's also the period when the intensity is racked up; usually rehearsing three to four nights a week from 7.30pm to 10.30pm. It's during this time that the full shape of the show begins to emerge.



My job as director is simply to strive to get the best out of each individual, give them the time and encouragement to express themselves. It's a beautiful thing to watch an actor blossom before your eyes, individuals who, in some cases, might be shy and reserved can transform into quite the show stealer. In truth, as director I don't think of everything, some of the best ideas come from that rehearsal period, actors and crew members forwarding suggestions; some of which we may run with, some we may not, my job is to decide what direction I want the show to take and whether to take those suggestions on board or not.

### Opening Night

Word had begun to spread around Carrigallen that this was a different type of production, a new departure for the group. I remember calling into John Reilly of *Modern Designs* one Saturday to get paint for the set and his first words to me was; 'What sort of a show are ye doing this year Ronan, a bit of a controversial one I hear? The Virgin Mary was already the talk of the town even before her stage appearance. We opened on Valentines night and because of the word on the street we started to get full houses early on, something that had never happened to any of our shows pre-festival. Possibly a good omen for what was to come.

When March arrives its time to hit the road and take your chances at the local regional festivals. For decades we have been entertaining the crowds in Ballinamore and Kiltyclogher and this year was to be no different. Throw into the mix trips to Ballyshannon, Carrickmore, Claregalway and Mountmellick not to mention an emotional return to the home of the authors; Cavan, it gives you a flavour as to the travel commitment involved. Fun for the actors who at the end of the night take the acclaim of the audience in each venue and the congratulatory comments from audience members as you meet them later that night, but the real stars are the ones backstage who make us look





good. They are the people you don't notice but without whom we can't operate. So to Philip, Barry, Neville, Daniel, Jonathan, Loui, Una and Orla—thank you.

Our early festivals were not running to plan. 2nd in Kiltyclogher. 3rd in Ballinamore and a no placing in Mountmellick. Not exactly how I had dreamt it months previously. But as a group we still believed that if we could get a break or two we could do it. With three festival left and no win we headed for Claregalway. We had a great show that night complimented by a standing ovation from the audience. Later that week I travelled back to Claregalway to get the results. Believe me when I tell you the sense of relief to get this win from adjudicator Padraic McIntyre was immense. Next up was Cavan, a sort of homecoming for the authors Philip and Kevin and indeed some of our cast. It was simple, we had to win to get to the All-Ireland finals as we had again come 2nd in Carrickmore the night previous. First meant a place in Athlone, anything less and we were going home. That simple. Thanks to adjudicator Tommy McArdle we won and we were on the road to Athlone. Fantastic!

Part of the razzamatazz that goes with qualifying for the All-Ireland finals is you get a little more exposure than usual. From the *RTE Guide* to our 15 minutes of fame on RTE's *Nationwide* (YouTube it), Radio One's *Countrywide* and the Marian Finucane Show, not to forget our own *Shannonside*, the delightful and always gracious Charlie McGettigan; one of our groups greatest supporters and promoters. All this during April when we had to say goodbye to one of our actresses; Dani who took up a job in Dubai and hello to another one, Elizabeth who had the daunting task of replacing her for the finals.

### Athlone

Athlone is regarded as the Mecca of the amateur drama world. Every drama group on the competitive circuit around Ireland dreams of some day getting to the RTE All-Ireland Finals and it still remains as strong a motivation for us as it was when we started out on the festival circuit in the early 1970s.

Athlone arrived and we were drawn on the third night of nine nights. Some might say not the ideal night but thankfully

■ *Director Ronan Ward with the cast and crew of 'The Devil's Céli'.* Among those in the photo are: Brian Reilly, Sean McIntyre, Aimee O Reilly, Deréic Ó Raghallaigh, Karen Greene, Glenn Shanley, Dani Smith, Sean Nixon, Geraldine McGrath, Valerie Maguire, Gus Ward, Tina Louise Hackett, Ronan Ward, Phil Gilbride, Glen Shanley, Karina Charles, Elizabeth Doonan, Stephen Gray, Ediel McIntyre, John Lockhart, Raymond Hackett & Killian Mc Guinness.

much better that the dreaded opening night. On the night, our show went as well as it had gone at home which is really all you can ask for. What we didn't plan for was the reaction at the final curtain call; 350 plus people standing up as one to greet us as we took our final bow. A standing ovation. Wow. It's simply something that doesn't happen at the All-Ireland finals. Yet here we were, getting a warm show of respect from not only season ticket holders but some of the very competitors who would be treading the boards later that week. That was a special moment.

The strange thing about Athlone and

its unique atmosphere is that everyone is ultra complimentary.

The nine competing groups, their directors and actors naturally wish you well. But remember, it is a competition, so if it happens that the adjudicator decides that your production isn't for him, then you're quickly left aside, forgotten about and left to dwell on what might have been. It can be quite harsh at times. 'Sure there's always next year', I've heard remarked numerous times as we pass out the door for the journey home. Thankfully this year we were still being talked about as the week progressed. The adjudicator; Scotland's Russell Boyce comments of 'a *Tour de Force production*' was still ringing in our ears as we headed to the awards ceremony in the Radisson Blu Hotel on that faithful Saturday. It's hard to put into words how we felt as each nomination and award was announced on the night. Thankfully we had Tony Fahy on hand to capture the magic moments which you can view on YouTube to this day. For the record we took away the *Abbey Theatre Award, Best Stage Manager; Loui Finnegan, Best Director; Ronan Ward and Best Overall Production*. Fantastic as a word doesn't do it justice. The scenes of simple joy, the emotion, the tears from rather big lads who really shouldn't be crying, the hugs, the kisses, the gracious nods and handshakes of congratulations from your rivals who understand what it means and what competition means — all the elements that were there for all to witness. Great to share those moments with all the members of the group who travelled to Athlone from Carrigallen on the night, our box office staff, front of house, coffee dock staff — all were there to be part of that moment — as it should be, after all we are a group, a team, a community.

#### The Abbey Theatre Award

The *Abbey Theatre Award* is a unique and newly commissioned award. It affords the right to the chosen group to perform their production at our *National Theatre — the Abbey Theatre Peacock*

*Stage*. This year we had our chance to shine. Three days, four performances including a *Saturday Matinee*, all in front of a sold out audience. Personally, I think this for most will be the moment of the year. Some of Ireland's best known and much loved actors have graced the stage of this hallowed venue and here we were; the pride of Leitrim (and Cavan to be fair), going toe to toe with each other in what was fifty minutes of absolute adrenaline filled moments of brilliance.

#### Galway

After a lot of dissuasion among the group, we decided that we would take our final bow in Galway in the Black Box Theatre. It had been a wonderful nine months, but it was mid June and it was time to put the show to bed. So rather than do another 10 shows in a small venue, such was the demand nationally we decided to take the show to a regional venue, a 400 seater theatre and see how we'd get on. This was new ground for our group as we had never ventured into this territory before, but we were in new territory so we jumped at the chance and thankfully it paid off as they came from north and south to catch our final run. Killian McGuinness remarked months later as he attended Ballyturk starring Cillian Murphy and Stephen Rea in the same venue how he got noticed by a punter who recalled how she was totally overwhelmed by the production and in particular by him. I guess he had made an impression on her, even months later. Who needs to be a professional?

To win an All-Ireland title in any grade is a wonderful achievement. To win it for the third time is really something special. We are very proud that we are able to put our county of Leitrim at the top table of theatre in Ireland. From Kildare to Donegal, Waterford to Dublin, there are groups who can only dream of having the success we have been lucky to achieve. But in truth, sometimes you make your own luck through hard graft,

commitment and a willingness to give off your best for what is essentially an amateur pastime. Remember, nobody from within the cast or crew get paid for their time. They simply do it for nights like Athlone, nights like the Peacock, nights like Galway. For every high there will be a low. For every win a loss. But it's that drive to be the best you can be and to entertain your community that keeps us coming back for more. The Devil's Céilí may not have been to everyone's liking. It may have offended some and I know it did, but for most who actually went and saw it, as opposed to those few who talked about something they didn't see, it was simply a refreshing and breathtaking look at a time in Irish life where we, as a nation were all a little too naive and innocent, where church and state had too much power and were never questioned. Maybe they should have been.

So in 2015 we begin again. A new production, a new cast and crew with the ambition to achieve. We move from the Ceilí hall to the class room, from the wonderful combined madness of Philip Doherty's and Kevin McGahern's minds to the sublime character creations and flowing language of Clones native Pat McCabe with *The Dead School*. Where will this journey take us? I guess we'll just have to wait and see. One thing I can guarantee for sure, we will have a great time on that journey and I hope you can join us at some point along the way.

