

**Jewel Theatre Audience Guide
Synopsis (Full)**

**THE BEAUTY QUEEN OF
LEENANE** by Martin McDonagh



by Susan Myer Siltan, Dramaturg
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THE FOLLOWING IS A FULL SYNOPSIS OF *THE BEAUTY QUEEN OF LEENANE*. IT CONTAINS SPOILERS THAT REVEAL PLOT SURPRISES. A SYNOPSIS OF ACT I THAT DOES NOT REVEAL PLOT SURPRISES CAN BE FOUND ON PAGES 16 AND 17 OF THE COMPLETE AUDIENCE GUIDE.

A bleak, black comedy, [The Beauty Queen of Leenane] focuses on an embittered 40-year-old spinster and her cantankerous old mother. The two live in a damp, ugly cottage in the west of Ireland and torment each other to great comic effect. But when the daughter takes up with a man, the play turns adeptly from comedy to tragedy.

—Sarah Hemming, "Gift of the Gab", *Independent*, 1996

SYNOPSIS

The play opens with Mag Folan sitting in her rocking chair in the living room/kitchen of her rural cottage in the dreary, rain-soaked, remote mountains of Connemara in Western Ireland. She shares the home with her daughter Maureen. Maureen comes in from the heavy rain, and she and Mag are soon bickering, their common mode of communication.

The next scene brings young Ray Dooley to the Folan's cottage to invite them to a party his family is giving the following evening for their uncle, who is returning to Boston after a holiday in Leenane. When Ray departs, Mag burns the invitation. Maureen returns after Ray has left and asks her mother if she has had visitors. When Mag denies it, Maureen persists. She knows her mother is lying because she passed Ray on the road as he was leaving. Mag finally admits to the visit, but not the invitation. Maureen forces her to drink a cold, lumpy cup of Complian, a nutritional drink, to punish her deceitfulness. When she met up with Ray, she tells her mother, he extended the invitation. Mag warns her against "gallivanting" with men at the party. Maureen is looking forward to gallivanting—she reveals that she has only ever been with two men, and they merely kissed. She makes plans to drive with her mother to a nearby city to buy a new dress to wear to the party.

The next scene is at night, after the party. Maureen and Pato Dooley enter the Folan home, quite inebriated and very happy to be together.

Pato reveals he will be back in England soon for his work. Maureen asks him if he is involved romantically with anyone, and he tells her he is not. After having tea and a bit of "smooching," they go to her bedroom.

The next morning (Act I, Scene 3), Mag shuffles to the kitchen and, as she does each morning, "pegs" (throws) her potty of "wee" in the sink. She picks up Maureen's discarded dress and complains about its skimpiness and its cost. Pato enters, startling her. He offers to make her Complian and porridge. As the two begin to talk at the kitchen table about Mag's scalded hand, Maureen interrupts, entering dressed only in her slip. She throws herself into Pato's lap, kissing him passionately, to his embarrassment and her mother's disgust. Furious, feeling threatened, and hoping to dissuade Pato's interest in her daughter, Mag tells him that it was Maureen who scalded her hand by pouring hot oil over it. She also discloses that Maureen spent time in a mental hospital, which leads to a loud verbal exchange between the two women. When Mag exits to produce the discharge papers as proof of her daughter's institutionalization, Maureen explains to Pato how the cruelty and racial slurs she endured more than 15 years ago working as a chambermaid in England led to a nervous breakdown. Pato sympathizes, assuring her, "There's no shame at all in that. Only means you do think about things and take them to heart". Still, when he asks Maureen to put on some clothes to ward off the morning chill, she feels rebuffed and tells him to leave. Despite Pato's reassurance that he isn't rejecting her, the couple part on less than favorable terms. Nevertheless, he promises to write to her from England.

Act II opens with Pato standing in his bedsit in England a few weeks later, composing a letter to Maureen aloud. In it, he assures her that his inability to perform sexually the night he spent with her was unrelated to his feelings for her: "It has happened to me a couple of times before when I've had a drink taken and was nothing to do with did I want to". He tells her that he is moving to Boston to work for his uncle and asks her to come with him. He suggests that she put Mag in a home or leave her in the care of her other daughters, who haven't taken any responsibility for her so far. There will be a going-away party for him in Leenane in two weeks and he wants her there. If he doesn't hear from her, he will consider her uninterested and move on. Pato then reads a

second letter, written to his brother Ray, entrusting him with his letter to Maureen and telling him that it is imperative that he deliver Maureen's letter directly into her hands.

Scene 2 opens with Ray and Mag watching a soap opera on television. Ray has come to the Folans to give Pato's letter to Maureen and is killing time waiting for her to return. A tedious length of time passes with no sign of Maureen, while Mag "pegs" Ray relentlessly with nagging demands that are designed to drive him out and leave the letter with her. Ray's frustration and irritation build to the breaking point. Entrusting the letter to Mag, he makes her swear on her life to give it to Maureen. When he's gone, she opens it and reads it, then takes it to the range and burns it.

Scene 3 finds both women at home the night of Pato's going-away party. They talk about Pato, and Maureen tells her mother that the short-lived affair is over because all the couple had in common was good sex. Maureen jokes around with a shortbread finger cookie, comparing it to a phallus and telling Mag that it reminds her of Pato. Mag responds by taunting her cagily, coming just shy of saying outright that she knows the couple didn't have sex the night they spent together. Maureen, determined to find out how and what Mag knows, begins to heat a pan of chip fat with quiet, controlled fury. Her mother, terrified, admits she burned Pato's letter. Maureen pulls her to the range, forcing the letter's details from her by repeatedly scalding her already-injured hand on the burner. When it becomes clear that Mag is still withholding critical information, Maureen pours the searing oil from the chip fat pan over her mother's hand, forcing Mag to divulge that Pato has asked Maureen to move to America to be with him. Suddenly elated, Maureen breaks away from Mag to quickly slip into her new dress, hoping she's not too late to catch Pato before he leaves the party. Ignoring her suffering mother, she speeds off. As the door shuts behind Maureen, Mag cries out in agony, "But who will look after me, so?"

The next scene takes place later the same night. Maureen is back from the party, pacing about the darkened cottage, swinging the fireplace poker and happily fantasizing about her romantic, last-minute meeting with Pato at the train station where he promised to wait for her to come

to Boston. Mag, who seems to be dozing in the rocker the whole time, suddenly pitches forward, a chunk of her fractured skull falling away from her head. Maureen, regarding her mother's lifeless body, says, "Twas over the stile that she did trip. Aye. And down the hill that she did fall. Aye."

In the final scene of the play, Maureen returns home after her mother's funeral. She gleefully burns the remainder of her mother's Complian and Porridge in the range, then brings a suitcase from the bedroom to the kitchen table. She starts to open it, then hides it to answer a knock at the door. It's Ray, offering his condolences and bearing a message from Pato. When he tells Maureen that Pato is sorry that he didn't get to see her before he left, she protests that she saw him off at the train station. Ray contradicts her, saying that Pato left in a taxicab. (There is no train station in Leenane.) He then tells her that Pato got engaged a week ago to Dolores Hooley, an American Pato knew because she came to Leenane with his uncle when he visited from Boston. Ray finds his swingball, which Maureen confiscated several years earlier, in the bookcase. He goes into a rage and leaves, but not before he tells Maureen, who is now sitting in Mag's rocking chair, that she is "the exact fecking image of your mother sitting there". Dazed, Maureen returns the suitcase to her bedroom while the last few stanzas of an old Irish folk song, a favorite of Mag's, play on the radio. Maureen's sisters made a request weeks earlier that the station dedicate the song to Mag for her birthday, and they are only now broadcasting it. The verse that's playing is about a suitor urging his young love to leave her grandmother and run away with him.