
On Conor McPherson

CONOR MCPHERSON

[*The Weir*]†

I wrote this play in Leicester where [my girlfriend] Rionach had a job as an academic. She'd rented a little house, and I sat there avoiding writing. The problem was that I'd worked the play out in my head and writing it down just seemed to damage the idea. I'd write two pages and get up and go for long fraught walks around the suburbs, stopping at the off-license for beer and returning to start preparing dinner for us. Dinner was an endeavor I could drag out for hours. I didn't have to write it.

Finally all these short bursts of writing emerged as a complete narrative, all handwritten. I went back to Dublin and paid my little sister, Margaret, a hundred quid to type it up. I couldn't look at it. I wasn't sure people would think it would work. Some characters telling each other ghost stories in a pub. Were the stories they told any good? Why should we care about the people who told them? I knew I liked them, but why should an audience agree with me? But as my sister typed she kept telling me how much she loved it. She's always been a critical person. She won't watch much television or go to many movies. And she'd never go to a play unless there was a very good reason. She sits reading a book while everyone watches something else. And if she liked *The Weir* it meant it was either very good or completely shite.

I passed the typed script on to Kevin Hely to see what he thought. He rang me the next day to say he hadn't been able to sleep. He'd been scared shitless and kept the light on all night.

I sent it to my agent to pass on to the Royal Court who'd commissioned it. The response was strong. They scheduled it pretty quickly, with Ian Rickson directing. Ian is a man from Lewisham, South London. The play is set in rural Leitrim in the Republic of Ireland. Only six hundred miles away, but worlds apart. We sat in a

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cramped little patisserie in Soho with Margaret's horrendously typed script in front of us. Ian made notes on it with a pencil. He had few quibbles. I think I agreed to change a few lines and that was it. We were on.

Under no illusions that he knew anything about Ireland, Ian flew over a few weeks later with set designer, Rae Smith. I met them at the airport and we hired a car. The plan was to drive up to Leitrim and do a tour of pubs in the countryside. Rae had her video camera with her. We were looking for ideas. I also wanted to show them the tiny hamlet where I thought the play takes place, Jamestown, with the weir on the Shannon. It had been about two years since I'd been there. And as I showed Ian and Rae around, I had some pangs of guilt and remorse. What gave me the right to situate a piece of fiction so firmly in a real place? I became slightly reluctant to talk about it anymore.

I remembered sitting with my grandad, Jack, in his little house outside Jamestown where he lived alone. Smoking, tipping ash into the fire, drinking bottled stout from a six-pack. And a world, half imagined, half rooted in reality, just about visible to me in the dark. A world of lost afternoons in suburban and rural bars. Of closing your eyes in the dim light, with a community who couldn't or wouldn't judge you.

There was all this stuff in me and it was all very real and I couldn't explain it. We got out of there, and went to bars and places more anonymous to me.

We drove around. Rae sketched things in a book. I showed them Yeats's grave near Ben Bulbin. Ian chatted to people in deserted bars, telling them the story of the play. I sat back, a little embarrassed. We ended up in Bundoran where we booked into a hotel. We went to a pub run by two sisters, and Ian told them what we were doing. Some suitable places were suggested to us. This turned into a bit of a session. Ian was our designated driver, and Rae and I were getting steadily pissed.

One bar we went into was tiny. It was Saturday night. The clientele was sitting up at the counter. Middle-aged, chatting away. But as soon as we ordered drinks everything stiffened. Me clearly from Dublin and Ian and Rae (the only woman in the place) with their London accents. The locals threw us curious glances over their shoulders. When we finally left I could sense them relax.

The next morning was beautiful. We went for a walk on the beach after breakfast and then drove back down to Leitrim. This time we went looking for places even more out of the way than the day before. We ended up in the little town of Dromahair. On Sundays in Ireland there's a "holy hour" between two o'clock and four

o'clock when you can't buy a drink in a pub. We made it into a cozy bar in Dromahair just before two.

Two men sat at the bar. One at one end and one at the other. They seemed out of each others' earshot but managed to have a conversation mainly consisting of grunts and sighs. The man nearest us was small and skinny. My father always said that people from Leitrim had a haunted look. This man had it. High, gaunt cheekbones and an almost suspicious squinting grin. The other man was round and wore a shiny suit that had to be twenty years old and worn every day. His face was red and he wore a cap.

The skinny fellow was drunk in that way that's carried on from last night. Half hungover, half not knowing what the hell's wrong with you. He fell into conversation with us. Where were we from and so on. Ian told him the story of the play while I drank Guinness, taking the edge off my own hangover. We in turn got his story of an American woman who'd moved to Dromahair. This was told with supportive grunts and indecipherable elaboration from the round man at the other end of the pub.

She had moved here the previous summer and our skinny friend, Fergus, had inveigled his way into her life by helping repair her house, which had been badly built. It turned out she was married back in America, and though everyone wondered what the hell she was doing, at the same time they just assumed she was a bit mad. This didn't stop Fergus from pursuing her, however. And at the bar he slapped his legs and rubbed his hands together telling us how he'd been the one to get into bed with her. Yes indeed, him and no one else. Good God, he'd been riding her morning, noon and night. Then one day, out of the blue, she decided to go and sort out her affairs at home in America. But she told Fergus that her plan was to definitely come back and settle in Dromahair. She asked him to mind her dogs while she was gone. But that was a year ago and Fergus was still minding her dogs. Every day he'd go up to her empty house and feed them, keeping his foot in the door as it were, waiting for her to return. Then he rubbed his hands together again in anticipation, and bought ten cans of Budweiser to take with him up to her house. He liked to get hammered while he fed the dogs.

After our fact-finding mission we returned to Dublin. Rae with her sketchbook and video footage, and me and Ian ready to cast the play. We auditioned people in Dublin and London. The original cast was Brendan Coyle as Brendan, Kieran Ahern as Jim, Julia Ford as Valerie, Jerry Horan as Finbar and Jim Norton as Jack.

The run was only supposed to be for three and a half weeks at the Royal Court in their small sixty-seat venue. We rehearsed in the Drill Hall, off the Tottenham Court Road.

Ian tries to cast ensemble plays with an eye as to how everyone is going to get on with one another. The atmosphere between the actors is important to the quality of their performance together, especially in a play where it's vital that they be seen to be listening to each other. A way that Ian bonds the cast is to bring extra people into the rehearsal room—experts whom the cast can question about what their characters might be experiencing. The first week of rehearsal was spent simply reading the play and talking about it, and then someone would come in and chat to us. We spoke with a bereavement counselor and two experts on the paranormal. The atmosphere was great. We were all learning together and a generosity of spirit seeped into the work.

I went home to Dublin after the first week of rehearsal confident that everything was alright. It was more than that. I found the whole process redemptive and I didn't want to leave. But with drama, for film or for stage, there often comes a point where the person with absolutely nothing more to give is the writer. And no one wants to feel like they're in the way.

I returned for the final week of rehearsal to find everyone in pretty good shape. The set in the Ambassador was extraordinary. The seating was arranged so that the audience was pretty much in the bar with the characters. It had a rare intimacy which must be a joy for any actor to work with.

The dress rehearsals went great, the only problem being me. Nit-picking about blocking and getting on Ian's nerves. And then we started previews. And every night, people in the audience fainted and had to be carried out of the theatre. It was awful. It usually happened when Julia, as Valerie, told her story about her daughter. Because these were previews and nothing had appeared in the papers about the play, no one knew the story. No one was prepared. And Julia's performance was devastating. When you've written something, you forget that each night the audience is hearing it for the first time.

Brain Cox came to the opening night and told me it was shit. It was the worst play he'd ever seen. I stood gaping at him, dumbfounded, not only because he seemed to hate it so much, but also that he'd be so insensitive as to say it to my face on opening night. But then he couldn't hold back his laugh. Rionach had got him to wind me up. People with nothing better to do. I feel sorry for them.

I was staying at Brian's house, and the morning the reviews came out Ian rang me and told me to buy the papers. I sleepily went around the corner to a local garage and took them back to bed with me. And I went back to sleep. I still feel like the raves we got are a weird dream because of this.

Well, so much for a three-week run. It's early 1999. There's sun

streaming in the windows and *The Weir* is still running in the West End.

It's strange when people ask me about the success of the play. I don't feel very responsible. I owe so much to all the good actors I've learned from. Good actors are out there doing things by instinct, and so often blessed with excellent judgment. I'm constantly surprised by them. And often I receive praise which I know is rightfully theirs.

I've been lucky so far. I've had the opportunity to work with so many talented people. There's been a lot of laughs, maybe a bit too much messing, but not too many tantrums. So here's to lots more late nights and regrettable proclamations. See yous in the bar.