

Introduction

In this book are seven plays, original works, which had their premieres at the Focus Theatre, and which grew out of the history, the artistic aims, and the personalities of the Focus Theatre. There have been many others, too many to cram into an anthology intended as an introduction to the styles and artistic voices that have been and continue to be found in this theatre company, voices such as Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy, Declan Burke-Kennedy, Michael Harding, Elizabeth Moynihan, Brian McAvera, Mike Poblete, and Aiden Harney. Let me explain.

In 1963 the 23-year-old Deirdre O'Connell, child of Irish immigrants to New York City in the United States, became an immigrant herself when she moved to Dublin, determined to bring the 'new' theatre of Konstantin Stanislavski to the Irish theatre. She had been a *Wunderkind* at the Actors' Studio which had been co-founded and run by the late Lee Strasberg, who was perhaps the most famous acolyte of Stanislavski in America. Admitted when she was eighteen, Deirdre made her mark very early with her superb acting and singing talents, and within a couple of years was teaching at the studio. From all accounts Deirdre had a bright future ahead of her as an actress, as talented as any of the other young actors making their way to the Studio (as it came to be called) in the late 1950s and 1960s, including Julie Harris, James Dean, Geraldine Page, Rod Steiger, Ben Gazzara, Rip Torn, Lois Wilson, Paul Newman, Dennis Hopper, Jo Van Fleet, Martin Sheen, Anne Bancroft, Shelley Winters, Estelle Parsons, Ellen Burstyn, and Al Pacino. But Deirdre had a vision of a theatre company.

In 1963, Deirdre opened the Stanislavski Studio in Dublin with the aim of providing training in an acting technique which allowed actors to reach for emotional truths without having to rely on 'inspiration', maddeningly imperfect and intermittent at best. Stanislavski, co-founder of the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) in 1894, spent years studying and analysing how actors prepared for their roles on stage, and over the years, in acting classes at MAT, built up a series of exercises which would allow each actor to work for an emotional level of truth in their performance. Stanislavski once defined acting as 'living truthfully in imaginary circumstances' and set about creating exercises which would allow the actor/student to find a psychophysical truthful reaction to a series of stimuli which would bring their character to life on stage and, most importantly, be repeatable from performance to performance. By the 1920s, following the Soviet Revolution and Civil War, many of Stanislavski's troupe of actors had fled their homeland and, armed with their teacher's training, set out to bring the

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technique to the various theatre capitals of the Western world. In the United States, several American actors, teachers, and directors, including Harold Clurman, Stella Adler, and Elia Kazan, created the Group Theatre from these principles, offering an extraordinary level of theatrical playing not seen in generations. And what emerged from these performances was not only well acted and well received productions of stage classics, but the beginning of a new playwriting which took advantage of these *new techniques, in plays by such young and up-and-coming writers as Clifford Odets* and, later, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. By the late 1940s, the American theatre had grabbed a powerful place for itself in world theatre.

In Ireland in the early 1960s, the general level of acting was largely mediocre and lamented by many of the drama critics of the day. Still, when a brash twenty-three-year-old American actress landed in Dublin and announced that her aim was to teach Irish actors how to act, her announcement was greeted with derision and distaste. Undeterred, Deirdre

proceeded, opened her acting training studio, and five years after that opened her theatre, the Focus Theatre in Dublin, where it remained and continues to this day, fifty years after her arrival, training actors and staging plays both old and new.

At first, the Focus produced largely known works, classics such as Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Sophocles' *Antigone*, Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, Turgenev's *A Month in the Country*, Albee's *A Delicate Balance*, Strindberg's *Miss Julie* and *The Father*, as well as 'new' plays from London and New York, such as Livings' *Kelly's Eye*, Melfi's *Birdbath*, Williams's *Talk to Me Like the Rain*, along with modernist works by Beckett *Happy Days*, Pinter *Old Times*, and Andreyv *He Who gets Slapped*. The Dublin critics were mainly ecstatic. They were now seeing superb ensemble productions of classic theatre which hadn't been produced in Dublin in generations. And as happened in the American theatre, new plays and new playwriting became sought after which would embrace the training, utilize the insights now being reached in a system which could free each actor and allow them, regardless of the style of writing and playing demanded, to seek and reveal.

The seven plays in this anthology do just that. Their styles range from Lewis Carroll's fantastical world, to a couple on the brink of a philandering weekend disaster, to a one-man show about Jonathan Swift with several characters all played by the same actor; an examination of two shoplifting thieves and the would-be writer who gets in their way, a battle royal between two sides of a world-famous painter, the reactions of multiple New Yorkers to that moment on September 11, 2001 when their world was changed forever, to the final days of an iconic movie star.

Listing them chronologically: the earliest of these plays, *Alice in Wonderland* (1979) by Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy, is a witty, theatrical, and highly accessible adaptation of what remains perhaps the most beloved avant-garde work of all time. For those at the time who were used to seeing largely 'realistic' works on the Focus stage, this came as a revelation, especially seeing what Stanislavski-trained actors could bring to the wonderfully illogical logic of Carroll and what the director (its author) could achieve on the small, cramped spaces at 6 Pembroke Place (Focus's home base). The result was pure theatre and a re-invigorated Focus.

The Day of the Mayfly (1980) by Declan Burke-Kennedy feels at first to be a standard, Focus-style realistic comedy/drama of two married lovers calling for performances that are deeply felt, through the techniques and training of the studio. But Burke-Kennedy also calls for a sense of colouring, lighting and sound design that opens the play to a sharing of emotions and desires with its audiences.

Talking Through His Hat (2003) by Michael Harding, presents Jonathan Swift and his guests at a dinner party, all performed by a single actor in a tour-de-force, recreating a time of Dublin's Georgian society and celebrating the art and craft of the performer.

Pinching for My Soul (2011) by Elizabeth Moynihan is a three-character play that is made up of single and singular monologues. Moynihan's characters are all defined through their obsessions and lives which revolve around the act of shoplifting (pinching): a young drug addict, a middle-aged politician's wife, and a young Irish-African security guard who dreams of being a writer.

Francis & Frances (2011) by Brian McAvera is a highly theatrical, disturbing, and brilliant meditation on art, sexuality, and morality as it examines the contentious and shocking life and disruptive art of the great painter, Francis Bacon.

New York Monologues (2011) by Mike Poblete presents us with a large

cast of characters who reveal, argue, and share their experiences of that momentous morning on September 11, 2001 in New York City as the twin towers of the World Trade Center were brought down in a shocking act of international terrorism. The connections between New York and Ireland are all too apparent in this deeply-felt play.

Hollywood Valhalla (2012) by Aiden Harney examines the end of film star Rock Hudson's life in a series of scenes between the dying star and his fitness instructor.

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Each of these scripts is followed by a short note, a memory of the production and in some cases its aims by its author. As will become quite clear, there is no single Focus play, no play which perfectly captures the spirit, the aesthetic aims, the physical abilities of this continually surprising fifty-year-old company.

6 Pembroke Place, where each of these was performed, is no more the home for the Focus Theatre. It closed its doors in April 2012. Since then Focus has survived by performing in other theatres and as of this writing is searching for a new home base. A fuller story of the Focus Theatre is to be found in a companion to this anthology, *Stanislavski in Ireland: Fifty Years of the Focus Theatre*, also published by Carysfort Press (2013). The situation looks quite promising and Focus continues to generate emotional support for its mission. Its effect on the acting industry of Ireland is quite palpable, with many of its former members and students popping up in films and on television, acting, directing, designing, and writing. Enjoy these plays. Read them aloud. Find a place to perform them. Share them with friends, teachers, local theatre groups. Support each other and support the Focus Theatre.

Steven Dedalus Burch, Theatre History, University of Alabama