



# THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD JM SYNGE

TEACHERS' RESOURCE PACK  
RESEARCHED & WRITTEN BY  
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THE  
OLD VIC  
THEATRE  
COMPANY

# THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

J M SYNGE



Gwendolen Chatfield  
HONOR BLAKE



Karen Cogan  
NELLY McLAUGHLIN



John Cormack  
BELLMAN



Niamh Cusack  
WIDOW QUIN



Drew Dillon  
PEASANT



Christopher Doyle  
PEASANT



Diarmuid De Faoite  
JIMMY FARRELL



James Greene  
PHILLY O'CULLEN



Gráinne Keenan  
SARA TANSEY



Frank Lavery  
MICHAEL JAMES  
FLAHERTY



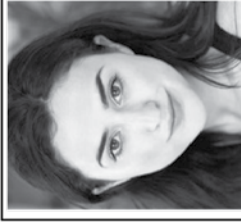
Gary Lydon  
OLD MAHON



Ruth Negga  
PEGEEN MIKE



Robert Sheehan  
CHRISTOPHER  
MAHON



Bronagh Taggart  
SUSAN BRADY



Kevin Trainor  
SHAWN KEOGH

Director  
Designer  
Lighting  
Sound  
Music

John Crowley  
Scott Pask  
Howard Harrison  
Christopher Shutt  
Philip Chevron

## JM SYNGE HIS STORY

John Millington Synge (pronounced 'sing') was born in County Dublin on the 16 April 1871, the eighth and youngest child of John Hatch Synge, a barrister, and his wife Kathleen Trill, the daughter of a Protestant rector. He was brought up within the Protestant Ascendancy – a privileged Anglo-Irish minority group whose views and values opposed those of the Catholic nationalist majority.

Synge was a gifted musician and linguist, so at the age of 18, he studied at both Trinity College Dublin, and the Royal Irish Academy of Music. In 1895, he enrolled at the Sorbonne in Paris, where he studied Irish and French, and alternated his time between Paris and Ireland over the course of the next few years.

While in Paris, Synge became friends with a group of Irish expatriates, including the poet WB Yeats, and in their company he began to write poetry and essays in which he explored socialism, nationalism and feminism. It was Yeats who gave Synge a piece of advice that may have been the turning point for his career: "Go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression."

Taking Yeats's advice, Synge visited the Aran Islands – including Inishmore and Inishmaan – in 1898 and developed a profound affinity with the people and the islands themselves. He visited the islands every summer for the next three years, and wrote a book about his time there, full of anecdotes, stories and observations. He spent his time wandering around the countryside, talking to strangers, and living by little or no means. Seamus Heaney wrote that "loneliness was his passport through the world." Whilst on the islands, he attempted to learn Gaelic from the islanders. His appreciation for the Gaelic language informed the vocabulary, rhythms and speech patterns of the plays he began to write.

Synge's first play *Riders to the Sea*, drew upon his experiences on the Aran Islands, and was produced by the Irish National Theatre Society – formed by Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory among others – in 1904. Despite the mixed reactions it received from audiences and critics, when the theatre company moved to a permanent home – the Abbey Theatre in Dublin – they continued to produce Synge's plays. It was during this period that Synge became engaged to the actress Molly Allgood, who played Pegeen in the original production of *The Playboy of the Western World*.

Back in 1897, Synge had developed early symptoms of Hodgkin's lymphoma, but they remained undiagnosed and Synge's health gradually began to deteriorate. In 1907, his cancer was diagnosed, but was deemed inoperable. Knowing that his approaching death was inevitable, Synge continued to work, writing more plays, and directing productions at the Abbey.

He died on 24 March 1909, at the age of 37, leaving his sixth and final play *Deirdre of the Sorrows* unfinished. Lady Gregory, Molly and Yeats worked on the manuscript, and produced it at the Abbey in 1910.

In the programme for this production, Joseph O' Connor writes that Synge "saw himself as a migrant among the natives, a blow-in to a community of festering ambivalences, in short, as a figure not unlike Christy Mahon, his most enduring and anti-heroic hero."

# CHRONOLOGY JM SYNGE'S LIFE & CAREER

<b>1871</b>	– Edmund John Millington Synge is born on 16 April in Rathfarnham, County Dublin.	<b>1904</b>	– <i>Riders to the Sea</i> is performed by the Irish National Theatre Society. Both plays transfer successfully to London. The Irish National Theatre Society establishes a permanent base – the Abbey Theatre in Dublin.
<b>1889–92</b>	– Synge studies Irish, Hebrew and Music at Trinity College Dublin and Royal Irish Academy of Music.		
<b>1892</b>	– Synge forms the Irish Literary Society.	<b>1905</b>	– Synge writes <i>The Well of the Saints</i> , which is performed at the Abbey, and is elected as one of the directors of the Irish National Theatre Society.
<b>1893–94</b>	– Synge travels to Germany to study music and German.		
<b>1895–97</b>	– Synge moves to Paris where he meets WB Yeats.	<b>1906</b>	– <i>The Well of the Saints</i> and <i>In the Shadow of the Glen</i> are translated and performed in Berlin and Prague respectively.
<b>1897</b>	– Synge develops early symptoms of Hodgkin's disease.		
<b>1898</b>	– Synge visits the Aran Islands for the first time.	<b>1907</b>	– Synge writes <i>The Playboy of the Western World</i> , which is performed at the Abbey, causing riots in the streets of Dublin. He becomes engaged to Molly Allgood – an actress playing the role of Pegeen Mike in the production. <i>The Tinker's Wedding</i> – largely recognised as Synge's only comedy – is published, but deemed 'too dangerous' to perform at the Abbey.
<b>1899</b>	– Yeats, Lady Gregory, Edward Martyn and George Moore found the Irish Literary Theatre.		
<b>1899–1901</b>	– Synge continues to travel between Paris and the Arran Islands.	<b>1909</b>	– Synge dies on 24 March, as a result of Hodgkin's disease.
<b>1902</b>	– Synge studies Old Irish at the Sorbonne in Paris. He writes his first plays: <i>Riders to the Sea</i> and <i>In the Shadow of the Glen</i> .		
	– The Irish Literary Theatre joins with the Fay brothers' Irish National Dramatic Company to become the Irish National Theatre Society.		
<b>1903</b>	– <i>In the Shadow of the Glen</i> is performed by the Irish National Theatre Society, and <i>Riders to the Sea</i> is published. Synge writes <i>When the Moon Has Set</i> .	<b>1910</b>	– <i>Poems and Translations</i> is published, and <i>The Tinker's Wedding</i> premieres in London.
			– Synge's final play – <i>Deirdre of the Sorrows</i> – is performed at the Abbey, with Molly Allgood in the title role.



# THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD SYNOPSIS

## ACT I

The play opens in a shebeen (public house) on the outskirts of a village on the North West coast of County Mayo. It is a dark autumn evening, and the landlord's daughter Pegeen Mike is writing an order for supplies. She teases her fiancé Shawn Keogh because he refuses to stay alone with her until they have received a dispensation permitting their marriage. Pegeen's father Michael Flaherty arrives with their neighbours Jimmy and Philly and they all continue to tease Shawn. A young stranger – Christy Mahon – enters the shebeen tired and dishevelled. When he is questioned, he reveals that he has recently murdered his father with a spade, and buried him in a potato field. Impressed by this, and encouraged by Pegeen, Michael offers Christy the position of pot boy at the shebeen, a role requiring him to look after Pegeen, and guard Michael's poteen (an illegal alcoholic homebrew). The older men leave the shebeen to attend a neighbour's wake, and Shawn leaves to see another neighbour, Widow Quin. Pegeen is fascinated by Christy, but as the two become close, Widow Quin arrives and interrupts them. Rumoured for having murdered her husband, she tells them that she would be a more appropriate friend to Christy than Pegeen. When the women exit, Christy reflects that if he had known that killing his father would have resulted in this amount of attention, he would have done it years ago.

## ACT II

The following morning, Christy is still celebrating his new found glory, but hides in the back room when four local girls enter the shebeen. He eventually comes out to talk to them and receive their gifts. Widow Quin arrives and announces that she has entered him for a local sports competition. When Pegeen returns to find Christy and the Widow with their arms linked, she tells the women to leave and although she is initially angry with Christy, he manages to charm her with his poetic talk. Shawn enters and tells Pegeen to chase after her sheep that have escaped. Whilst she is gone, he and Widow Quin try to persuade Christy to leave, bribing him with new clothes and a boat ticket to America. While Christy tries on the clothes, at Widow Quin's insistence, Shawn leaves the two of them alone. Old Mahon – Christy's supposedly dead father – enters, and Christy hides from him behind a door. Mahon tells Widow Quin that he is looking for his weak and lazy son, who attacked him with a spade. She pieces together the true story, and sends him off, telling him that she saw his son fleeing over the hills to catch a boat. Once again left alone with Christy, Widow Quin promises to help him. She initially tries to persuade him to go and live with her, but when this fails, she promises to stop Pegeen and everyone else from finding out the truth, in return for various gifts. The village girls enter and escort Christy down to the beach to compete in the sports competition.

## ACT III

Philly and Jimmy return to the shebeen on their way back from the wake, and drunkenly discuss Christy. Old Mahon returns and shows them his injured head. Widow Quin tries to distract him, and tells the other men that he is mad and that they mustn't believe anything that he tells them. They are interrupted by loud cheering coming from outside, and they watch the mule race through the windows. Mahon recognises the winner of the race as his son, but Widow Quin assures him that he is imagining it, and should leave. He agrees, and is followed out by Philly and Jimmy. Christy enters triumphantly, and tells Pegeen that he intends to marry her. As the couple discuss their romantic future together, Michael returns with the dispensation granting the marriage of Pegeen to Shawn. Pegeen tells her father that it is Christy that she wants to marry, and although he is initially horrified, he quickly realises that Christy is the better option for his daughter, and gives them his blessing. Old Mahon returns again, and begins to attack Christy. All present realise that Christy has been lying to them, and refuse to help him. Christy chases his father out of the shebeen brandishing a spade, and returns a moment later, apparently having really killed him this time. Widow Quin and Shawn try to disguise him by dressing him in petticoats so that he can escape, but he refuses. Expecting to have once again won everyone round, he is surprised to find that they are even more against him now, with Pegeen telling him that 'there's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed.' Shawn and Pegeen tie him up, and encouraged by the crowd, Pegeen burns him with a lit sod of turf. To everyone's great surprise, Old Mahon enters once again, and unties Christy, saying that they will leave the village and tell everyone about 'the villainy of Mayo.' Newly confident, Christy tells his father that he will go with him, but that it will be him that gives the orders from now on. With Christy gone, Shawn believes that he and Pegeen will now be able to marry, but Pegeen rebuffs him, as she mourns the loss of 'the only Playboy of the Western World.'

# THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

## CHARACTER BREAKDOWN

### CHRISTOPHER 'CHRISTY' MAHON

Christy Mahon is a young man from a different town, who arrives at Michael Flaherty's shebeen with the news that he has murdered his father. He is the 'playboy' that the title of the play refers to. Although the word would not have had the same connotations in Synge's time as it does now, it would have had the double meaning of 'charmer' and 'trickster'. Christy portrays both of these characteristics over the course of the play. When he first appears, he is 'tired, frightened and dirty' and comes across as shy and humble. His father describes the Christy he knows as a 'dirty, stuttering lout' who is scared of girls, but as the play progresses, and he attracts attention and praise from the other characters – particularly the women – Christy becomes far more confident and charismatic, and he begins to speak using increasingly poetic language. Towards the end of the play, he reveals another side to his personality, becoming violent and aggressive, and leaves the shebeen seemingly full of new confidence.

### PEGEEN MIKE (MARGARET FLAHERTY)

Pegeen is Michael James's daughter, and the barmaid at the shebeen. She is described as 'a wild-looking but fine girl, of about twenty.' She is feisty and confident, bossing around her father, and Shawn, her second cousin to whom she has been engaged. However, her apparent independence is contradicted by her fear of staying in the shebeen alone, suggesting a certain dichotomy in her character. When she meets Christy, she is attracted to his danger, and to the outside world that he represents to her, a world of opportunities and romance that have so far been lacking in her life. She behaves flirtatiously around Christy, but is abrupt and assertive towards Widow Quin and the girls of the village. She also has a violent streak, attacking Christy with a burning sod of earth when she learns that he has lied to her. However, when he finally leaves, she is bereft, and mourns the loss of 'the only Playboy of the Western World.'

### WIDOW QUIN

Widow Quin is a woman who lives in the village, whose children have died, and who has allegedly murdered her husband. Like Christy, she is an outsider, but unlike Christy, she has been excluded, not welcomed by the community. Attracted to Christy, she seems to be driven by lust and money. She is witty and crafty, and manages to talk and joke herself out of difficult situations. When she finds out that Christy has lied, her feelings towards him do not change, and she agrees to help him – as long as he pays her. However, when the rest of the village turn against him, she tries to help him escape, this time without standing to gain anything herself, suggesting that she also has a caring side to her seemingly abrasive personality.

### MICHAEL JAMES FLAHERTY

Michael James, as he is known, is the proprietor of the shebeen in which the play is set. He is a popular figure within the local community, and the father of Pegeen Mike. He is described as being a 'fat, jovial publican,' and in Act I we see him teasing Pegeen's fiancé Shawn, and being friendly and welcoming towards Christy when he arrives. He seems laidback, initially willing to leave his daughter alone overnight whilst he attends a wake, and is then surprisingly trusting of the alleged murderer. He is also a religious man, and when Christy's lies are revealed, it is he who suggests that the locals hang him, so that God does not punish them for harbouring him.

## SHAWN KEOGH

Shawn is 'a fat and fair young man' who is engaged to be married to his second cousin, Pegeen Mike. He is submissive towards everyone, including Pegeen, and is frequently the butt of people's jokes. He is also religious, initially refusing to stay alone with Pegeen until they are married. He is wary of Christy, and jealous of the attention he gets from Pegeen. He is driven through the play by his desire to get rid of Christy, and displays a certain amount of cunning in his attempts to get rid of him. When he discovers that Pegeen wishes to marry Christy, he becomes depressed and resentful, but is too scared to fight him.

## OLD MAHON

Mahon is Christy's father, who is assumed dead throughout Act I. When he appears in Act II, he is injured, having been attacked by Christy, and aggressive. He is proud of the injuries he has sustained and talks about Christy derogatively, describing him in such a way that makes him seem unrecognisable from the Christy the audience and the other characters have been introduced to. When he returns in Act III, Mahon becomes a more sympathetic character, tired, emotional and confused, doubting his sanity, but his aggression returns before the end of the play.





# THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD HISTORICAL & GEOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

**Achill** an island to the south of County Mayo

**Belmullet** a small port 40 miles north-west of Castlebar

**Binghamstown** a town in County Mayo

**Carrowmore** Lough Carrowmore, a lake in the north-west of County Mayo, popular for salmon and trout fishing

**Castlebar** the largest town in County Mayo

**Cavan** a county to the east of County Mayo

**Circuit Judges** High Court judges who travelled from town to town

**Connaught** a Western province of Ireland, now known as Connacht

**Dan Davies' Circus** a fictional small travelling circus

**Dingle Bay** a bay in County Kerry

**Eastern world** the Far and Middle East, associated with fantasy and fairytales

**Erris Plain** a district in north-west County Mayo

**Holy Brigid** St Brigid, one of Ireland's favourite saints

**Holy Luthers** a strict division of the Protestant Church

**Keel** a small town on Achill Island

**Kerry** a county on the south-west coast of Ireland

**Kilmainham** a jail in Dublin

**Meath** a county on the east coast of Ireland

**Munster** the southernmost province of Ireland

**Neifin** a mountain near Castlebar, famous for being a romantic location, more commonly spelt 'Nephin'

**Owen** the river Owenmore, which runs through the north-west of County Mayo

**Owen Roe O'Sullivan** an 18th Century poet

**Samhain** All Souls' Day, 1 November

**Sneem** a town in County Kerry

**Stooks of the Dead Women** a collection of rocks off the coast of County Kerry

**Western states** America

**Western world** Europe and the Americas or the 'real' world as opposed to the fairytale 'Eastern world'



# IRISH DRAMA BEFORE & AFTER SYNGE

In his preface to *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge writes:

“In Ireland, for a few years more, we have a popular imagination that is fiery, and magnificent, and tender; so that those of us who wish to write start with a chance that is not given to writers in places where the springtime of the local life has been forgotten.”

Synge and his contemporaries at the Abbey Theatre, including Lady Augusta Gregory and WB Yeats, are credited with paving the way for a new breed of Irish dramatists. Breaking away from the social comedies and melodramas of the major Irish writers before them, they wrote plays that were more firmly rooted in Irish culture, and told stories of everyday Irish life, often writing in local Irish dialects. All of these elements formed the basis of what was to become a new national theatrical style. Although he only wrote six plays in his short lifetime, Synge’s work has not just influenced other Irish dramatists, but has inspired writers and directors worldwide.

## BEFORE SYNGE

From the late-18<sup>th</sup> to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, several very successful dramatists emerged from Ireland, but rather than honing their skills and launching their careers in their own country, they had to leave Ireland for London to develop their craft. As a result, their plays focused on London city life, rather than the Irish towns from which they came. Oliver Goldsmith and Richard Brinsley Sheridan were among the leading proponents of the revival of the ‘Comedy of Manners’ that emerged from the Restoration comedy genre. Dion Boucicault wrote comedies in a similar vein, but also followed the late 19<sup>th</sup> century trend for melodramas. Oscar Wilde’s social comedies seem a natural progression from the comedies of his predecessors, but they generally dealt with more serious issues regarding class and gender, as Wilde himself has said ‘treating the serious things lightly and the light things seriously.’ George Bernard Shaw was heavily influenced by the work of Henrik Ibsen, and so although, like Wilde, he used comedy to great effect, many of his plays dealt with hard-hitting social issues, and he paved the way for writers like Synge to write social dramas that were more realistic than those previously seen on stage.

**Oliver Goldsmith** (1728–1774)

Selected works: *She Stoops to Conquer*, *The Good Natur’d Man*

**Richard Brinsley Sheridan** (1751–1816)

Selected works: *The Rivals*, *The School for Scandal*

**Dion Boucicault** (1820–1890)

Selected works: *London Assurance*, *The Shaughraun*

**Oscar Wilde** (1854–1900)

Selected works: *The Importance of Earnest*, *An Ideal Husband*

**George Bernard Shaw** (1856–1950)

Selected works: *Pygmalion*, *Saint Joan*

### AFTER SYNGE

Following Synge's early death, the next major dramatist to emerge from Ireland was the poet Austin Clarke. Like Synge, Clarke experimented with theatrical dialogue, and wrote verse plays that were in English, but that drew heavily on the rhythms and patterns of the Irish language. Theatre practitioner Antonin Artaud claimed that *The Playboy of the Western World* featured many of the fundamental values behind his 'Theatre of Cruelty' – a form of heightened drama which aimed to confront the audience with a reality they did not necessarily want to be faced with. The Theatre of Cruelty movement in turn gave rise to the Theatre of the Absurd – a theatrical style drawing heavily on existential philosophy. Samuel Beckett was one of the leading figures in the Absurdist movement, and credits Synge with being a major influence on his work. In more recent years, a new generation of Irish writers, including Frank McGuinness and Brian Friel, have written plays about rural life in Ireland, often dealing with important political and cultural issues. Perhaps most obviously influenced by Synge is the writer Martin McDonagh, who wrote a trilogy of plays set on the Aran Islands, exploring themes of community, outsiders, and Irish identity.

**Austin Clarke** (1896–1974)

Selected works: *The Son of Learning*, *The Flame*

**Samuel Beckett** (1906–1989)

Selected works: *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*

**Brian Friel** (1929–)

Selected works: *Translations*, *Dancing at Lughnasa*

**Frank McGuinness** (1953–)

Selected works: *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards The Somme*, *Dolly West's Kitchen*

**Martin McDonagh** (1970–)

Selected works: *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, *The Cripple of Inishmaan*



# THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD COMEDY OR TRAGEDY?

According to the Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms, a **comedy** is “a play written chiefly to amuse its audience by appealing to a sense of superiority over the characters depicted...Its ending will usually be happy for the leading characters.” Conversely, a **tragedy** is “a serious play representing the disastrous downfall of a central character...The usual conclusion, involving the protagonist’s death, has become the defining feature in later uses of the term.”

It seems clear that *The Playboy of the Western World* doesn’t sit comfortably within either of these traditional theatrical genres, containing as it does, key elements of both comedy and tragedy. There are undoubtedly lines and moments which Synge intended to amuse his audience with, but not necessarily by making them feel superior to the characters. And the play certainly does depict Christy’s downfall (as well as his ascent), but rather than dying at the end, he seems optimistic for his future.

In a public letter to the press, answering his critics who were confused as to the genre of the play, Synge himself wrote:

“*The Playboy of the Western World* is not a play with a ‘purpose’ in the modern sense of the word, but, although parts of it are, or are meant to be, extravagant comedy, still a great deal that is in it and a great deal more that is behind it is perfectly serious when looked at in a certain light. This is often the case I think, with comedy, and no one is quite sure today whether Shylock or Alceste should be played seriously or not. There are, it may be hinted, several sides to *The Playboy*.”

In his essay ‘Christy’s Binary Vision in *The Playboy of the Western World*’, Michael J. Collins writes that Widow Quin “is a realist who accepts the fallen world. Pegeen is an idealist who dreams of a heroic, romantic world. Neither wins Christy because neither can do both. Christy triumphs in the end because he can dream and do the ‘dirty deeds’ to make his dreams come true.”

Perhaps the same could be said of the play itself. It isn’t intended to be a dark and realistic tragedy. But neither is it intended to be a fantastical comedy. Synge treads a fine line between the two, drawing on elements of both, simultaneously telling “a gallous story and a dirty deed.”





# THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD PERFORMANCE HISTORY

## THE RIOTS

The first performance of *The Playboy of the Western World* at the Abbey Theatre on 26 January 1907 has become almost as well known as the play itself.

After Act I, Lady Gregory sent a telegram to WB Yeats, with the words: “Play a great success.” But during Act II, some noticed a shift in the general mood of the audience. Padraic Colum, in his book *The Road Round Ireland*, remembers that the audience “had been growing hostile from the point where Christy’s father enters. That scene was too representational. There stood a man with horribly-bloodied bandage upon his head, making a figure that took the whole thing out of the atmosphere of high comedy.”

However, it was not until Act III, when Willie Fay – the actor playing Christy – delivered the line “It’s Pegeen I’m seeking only, and what’d I care if you brought me a drift of Mayo girls, standing in their shifts itself maybe,” that the audience’s fury became apparent. Taking to their feet, the predominantly male audience began shouting, transforming into what Fay described as “a veritable mob of howling devils.” It was at this point that Lady Gregory sent another telegram to Yeats, this time stating: “Play broke up in disorder at the word ‘shift.’”

Perhaps it was simply the mention of a female undergarment that angered the audience. However, the word is mentioned in Act I as well, an utterance that appeared to go unnoticed. Fay may have also exacerbated the situation by replacing Synge’s original ‘chosen females’ with the more locally resonant ‘Mayo girls.’ Shifts also had political connotations: when it was discovered that the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, Charles Parnell, had been having an affair, his opponents waved shifts at him.

It is most likely, however, that the real reason behind the riots was more deep-rooted, and that this apparently scandalous line provided a catalyst for the action. Audiences had been growing suspicious of Synge following his earlier plays, unaccustomed to seeing their own world onstage. Many felt that Synge was satirising them and ridiculing their lives. *The Freeman’s Journal* – an Irish nationalist newspaper – described the play as “an unmitigated libel on peasant men and, worse still, upon Irish peasant girlhood.”

At the play’s second performance the cast had to resort to performing the whole play in mime as the audience arrived ready to riot, blowing trumpets and shouting “Kill the author!” The Abbey refused police requests to cancel the remaining performances, and so protests and disturbances continued throughout the play’s week-long run.

After the riots, Synge wrote to his fiancée Molly Allgood, the actress playing Pegeen: “It is better any day to have the row we did last night than to have your play fizzling out in halfhearted applause. Now we’ll be talked about. We’re an event in the history of the Irish stage.”

### OTHER NOTABLE PRODUCTIONS

Since its first performance, *The Playboy of the Western World* has been constantly revived, revised and revisited in productions across the world. Although Synge was writing about a very specific area of Ireland, it seems that his themes of community and outsiders are universal, such is the reach of the translations and adaptations it has spawned.

- 1912** – *Der Held des Westerlands* – a German translation by Sil-Vara and Charles H Fisher, was performed across Germany and Austria
  
- 1963** – A film version, produced in Ireland and adapted and directed by Brian Desmond Hurst, starred Siobhán McKenna as Pegeen and the English actor Gary Raymond as Christy.
  
- 1975** – The German composer Giselher Klebe, and his wife Lore, used *Playboy* as the basis of their opera *Ein wahrer Held (A True Hero)*.
  
- 1975** – Galway-based Druid Theatre staged *The Playboy of the Western World* as their first production, taking Synge as their 'house dramatist'. Director Garry Hines revived the show in 1984 at London's Donmar Warehouse, and again in 2005 to celebrate Druid's 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.
  
- 1975** – Bill Bryden directed a National Theatre production of *The Playboy of the Western World* at The Old Vic, with Stephen Rea as Christy and Susan Fleetwood as Pegeen.
  
- 1984** – Oxford Playhouse commissioned Trinidadian playwright Mustapha Matura to write *Playboy of the West Indies*, transporting the story to 1950s Trinidad.
  
- 1994** – Lee Gowan adapted the Synge's script for the Canadian TV movie *Paris or Somewhere*, which starred Callum Keith Rennie as a young American farmer who arrives in a small Canadian town.
  
- 2006** – Irish theatre company Pan Pan, in collaboration with Beijing Oriental Theatre, staged a Chinese adaptation of the play set in a Beijing hair salon. Policemen were called to attend the production when the audience became outraged at the shortness of one of the character's skirts.
  
- 2007** – African company Arambe commissioned Bisi Adigun and Roddy Doyle to write a modern adaptation set in a suburb of Dublin, in which Christy was a Nigerian refugee. The play was directed by Jimmy Fay and was performed at the Abbey Theatre, starring Giles Terera as Christy and Eileen Walsh as Pegeen.

## THE REAL PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD?

In his book *The Aran Islands*, Synge recounts a story he heard whilst travelling there, “about a Connaught man who killed his father with the blow of a spade when he was in a passion, and then fled to this island and threw himself on the mercy of some of the natives with whom he was said to be related.” He goes on to tell how the locals hid the man for weeks, before helping him escape to America. Although several details have been changed, it is easy to see how this story triggered *The Playboy of the Western World*. There are also frequent other passages in this book which he seems to have used as direct inspiration for events in the play, including a mule race on the beach, and quotes from conversations.

However, it is clear that Synge also drew on other sources for inspiration. It is widely believed that Synge based the character of Christy Mahon on real-life fugitive James Lynchehaun. Lynchehaun was a notorious trickster who worked for an English landlady, Agnes McDonnell, on Achill Island. When she sacked him on 6<sup>th</sup> October 1894, he savagely attacked her and set fire to her house. Miraculously, she survived, despite suffering severe facial disfigurement, and Lynchehaun was arrested and charged. However, Lynchehaun escaped from custody, and was hidden by his friends on Achill Island. They eventually betrayed him to the police, although despite spending seven years in jail, he managed to escape again and fled to America.

Lynchehaun’s story was immortalised more explicitly in James Carney’s 1986 novel, *The Playboy and the Yellow Lady*, which in turn was adapted into the 1996 film, *Love and Rage*, starring Daniel Craig and Greta Scacchi.

In *The Playboy of the Western World*, Lynchehaun is referred to by Susan Brady in Act II as the man who ‘bit the yellow lady’s nostril on the northern shore.’



## MURDER AS CELEBRITY ON SCREEN & STAGE

Since *The Playboy of the Western World*, popular culture has frequently drawn on the idea of murder as a means of achieving fame and glory.

*The Threepenny Opera*, written by Bertolt Brecht with songs by Kurt Weill, is an adaptation of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*. It was first performed in 1928, and sees the fictional criminal Macheath – immortalised in the song 'Mack the Knife' – championed as a hero, eventually pardoned and rewarded by Queen Victoria.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, you are about to see a story of murder, greed, corruption, exploitation, adultery and treachery - all the things we hold near and dear to our hearts." Kander and Ebb's popular musical *Chicago* (1975) – based on the play of the same name by Maurine Dallas Watkins – tells the story of housewife Roxie Hart, who achieves her dreams of becoming a famous singer when she murders her lover. Although it has been accused of glamourising murder, the show actually satirises the apparent hypocrisy of the American media and justice system, and ridicules the notion of 'celebrity'.

Stephen Sondheim's 1990 musical *Assassins* is based on the true stories of various men and women who sought fame, love or happiness by attempting to assassinate American presidents. Sondheim mocks the motivations of figures including Lee Harvey Oswald, John Wilkes Booth and Lynette 'Squeaky' Fromme - who idolises the notorious serial killer Charles Manson - and seems to suggest that they are the product of a capitalist society.

In 1994, Oliver Stone's film *Natural Born Killers* caused worldwide controversy, with its uncompromising depictions of murder and rape, and apparent celebration of fictional serial killers Mickey and Mallory. Carrying the tag-line 'the media made them superstars,' the film follows the couple – played by Woody Harrelson and Juliette Lewis – on a brutal killing spree across America. The media coverage their crimes receive results in them becoming cult-heroes with a legion of fans and followers. Although the film has been blamed for countless 'copycat' killings, Stone has stated that the film is a satirical reflection of such crimes, rather than the cause.



# A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO THE IRISH ACCENT

It is generally acknowledged that there are 32 different regional Irish accents – 1 accent for every county in Ireland – and legend has it that a true Irishman can tell the difference between all 32. Although the majority of the actors working on this production are Irish, the accent spoken by the characters in *The Playboy of the Western World* is very particular to County Mayo, so they had to spend a great deal of time working with a dialect coach during the rehearsal period perfecting the nuances of the County Mayo accent.

The best way to learn an accent is by listening to people speaking in that accent and trying to emulate the sounds of their speech, but to start you off here are some tips to help you speak with a general Irish accent.

## 1. SOFTEN YOUR VOWELS

The 'ah' sound in R.P. (received pronunciation or 'the Queen's English') is traditionally placed towards the front of your mouth, giving a closed sound eg the 'a' in 'bath' would be pronounced in the same way as the 'ar' in 'arch'. However, most Irish accents would have it pronounced in the same way as the 'a' in 'bag', placing the sound further back in the mouth, giving it more space by raising the cheeks. Another example of softening vowels which has become one of the most recognisable features of the stereotypical Irish accent is the pronouncing of 'I' as 'oi'.

<b>Tomato</b>	RP: <b>toh-mar-toe</b>	Irish: <b>ta-ma-toe</b>
<b>Ireland</b>	RP: <b>ah-yer-lund</b>	Irish: <b>oi-er-land</b>
<b>How are you?</b>	RP: <b>ha-war-yoo</b>	Irish: <b>ha-ware-ya</b>
<b>I'm grand</b>	RP: <b>ah-ym grand</b>	Irish: <b>oim grand</b>

## 2. SLUR VOWEL SOUNDS TOGETHER

Don't separate the syllables of words and phrases into separate beats. Instead try to slur it all together like one long syllable eg 'Hawareya?'

## 3. HARDEN YOUR CONSONANTS

Although vowel sounds frequently blend into one, in consonant-heavy words, every consonant is pronounced, so practice speaking with very precise diction. The majority of Irish accents also replace the hard 'th' sound in words such as 'the', 'that' and 'this', with a 'd' sound, so they would be pronounced 'de', 'dat' and 'dis'. Similarly, a soft 'th' sound, as found in the words 'think' and 'thought' for example, is often replaced by a harder 't' sound, so they become 'tink' and 'tought'.

## 4. VARY YOUR INFLECTION

Some say that accents reflect the geographic locale in which they are spoken. Perhaps this is the reason that the Irish accent has a 'sing-song' up-and-down quality to it, suggesting the hills and dales of the Irish countryside. The constant shifting rhythm and tone in Irish speech patterns makes it almost musical, perfectly complementing Synge's poetic language.



# GLOSSARY OF IRISH TERMS

- bad cess** bad luck  
**banbh** piglets  
**baronies** subdivisions of a county  
**bedizened** dressed in a gaudy fashion  
**blackthorn** walking stick  
**blather** (n.) nonsense, or (v.) to talk nonsense  
**bog** a wet heath that accumulates peat  
**boghole** an area of bog from which peat has been cut  
**bona fides** travellers from over three miles away, for whom a public house is legally allowed to stay open late  
**boreen** narrow lane
- cholera morbus** a fatal strain of cholera  
**clack** (n.) chatter, gossip, (v.) to chatter or gossip  
**cnuceen** small hill  
**cockshot man** a target at which balls are thrown at a fair  
**cot** cottage  
**creel cart** a cart with a large basket attached  
**crupper** a leather strap used to secure a saddle to a horse  
**curagh** a type of small canoe  
**cuteness** cleverness
- da** father  
**dispensation** permission to marry, granted by the Church  
**doul** blind  
**dram-shop** a public house  
**dray** a cart designed to transport beer barrels  
**drouth** thirst
- een** Added to the end of a word, suggesting something small eg 'Shaneen' means 'little Shawn', 'supeen' means 'little drink'
- frish frash** a type of porridge made with oats and cabbage  
**furze** gorse bush
- gaffer** lad  
**gallous** splendid  
**gripe of the ditch** a trench or hollow  
**griseldy** grisly
- hap'worth** a halfpenny's worth  
**harvest hundreds** people travelling to Scotland to seek work  
**hitch** noose  
**hooker** a type of small boat  
**hooshing** encouraging
- keen** a wailing lament for the dead
- liefer** rather  
**loy** a spade designed to dig up potatoes
- making game of** teasing  
**mitch off** to play truant
- old hen** flu
- parlatic** paralytic, extremely drunk  
**pandied** beaten up  
**paters** the Lord's Prayer  
**peeler** policeman  
**pitch pike** a two-pronged fork for throwing hay  
**polis** police  
**porter** a type of malt beer  
**poteen** illegally brewed alcoholic spirit  
**pullet** a young hen  
**puzzle-the-world** mystery
- riz** raised  
**rating** scolding
- seamed** wrinkled  
**shebeen** a small informal pub  
**shift** woman's underskirt  
**skelping** beating  
**spavindy** lame  
**streeler** a layabout  
**supeen** a small portion of drink
- thraneen** a small straw, or a weak person  
**tooth comb** a small comb, often used to catch headlice  
**trick o' the loop** a popular guessing game
- Union** workhouse
- whisht** be quiet

## IN CONVERSATION WITH...

### NIAMH CUSACK

**What was it that attracted you to the role of Widow Quin in this production?**

I'd played Pegeen Mike as a younger actress, and I loved the play. The play is actually something of a family play. My husband has played Christy, my father has played Christy, my sister Sinead has played Pegeen, and my sister Sorcha has played the Widow Quin twice, so it's a play that's close to my heart. I think it's a work of genius. Also, wanting to be a part of a production directed by John Crowley, who I really admire, definitely contributed to me saying "yes". I love working at The Old Vic; this theatre has so much history, and I've had a great time each time I've worked here. I also love the fact that I've played Pegeen, and now I'm playing the older woman. And watching and celebrating a younger woman playing Pegeen – as beautifully as Ruth Negga does – is brilliant.

**What's been the most enjoyable part of this process for you?**

That's a difficult question because it's all been enjoyable but it's been discovering what an amazing, complex, rich and fearless person Widow Quin is. The audience seem to love that character; I think that has very little to do with me and everything to do with Synge.

**What do you think drives Widow Quin through the play?**

Survival. She's lost her husband, she's lost her children, she has nothing really, and she survives by hook or by crook. She gets as much information to use on anyone in the area so that she can barter with it. Although she is tolerated by the society, she is an outsider and always will be. There's something about Christy's spirit and the fact that he's an underdog that she recognises, so she feels a great kinship with him. When the community turns against him, she doesn't collude with them because they're both outsiders and she knows what this community is like.

**There's been a great deal of debate as to whether the play is a tragedy or comedy. What do you think?**

I don't think it's a comedy. I think it's a love story fundamentally with a tragic end. A tragicomedy and the comedy is incidental, like the best comedy is. But the love story between Pegeen and Christy is the one that people will invest in. Without the heart of those two, it wouldn't be a great play. The fact that we probably have all fallen in love at some point means that the way that these two connect with each other is something that we all recognise. Added to that is this language, which makes their falling in love seem epic. Being alive is an epic experience and that that's what Synge has really got his finger on the pulse of. The people in this play have nothing but they are alive and they are very much alive to being alive.

**Do you feel any added pressure as an Irish actress performing one of the most famous works in the Irish canon?**

I don't think I thought a lot about it during rehearsals but when I arrived on the first day and saw Synge's name above the theatre I felt very moved because he died when he was 37. He was never hailed as the great playwright he was subsequently acknowledged as being, so I feel a responsibility to Synge and a responsibility to the character of Widow Quin. But most of all I want to share it and that's not really a responsibility; that's a kind of joy. I just want every person who has never seen this play to see it and I think this is as good a production as you're ever going to see.



## IN CONVERSATION WITH RUTH NEGGA

### **What attracted you to the role of Pegeen Mike in this production?**

I love the play. It's very funny and it makes me laugh. It's an affectionate send-up in a way. Some people may have a problem with how grotesque the characters are but I think it's cleverer than that and it's much more complex than that. What drew me to Pegeen was the darkness about her, the vulnerabilities that she hides with her caustic nature. Inside her, there's a delicate, poetic spirit that she finds reflected back at her by Christy. It's so interesting that Synge could construct a woman, at that time, whose armour falls away as the play unfolds. People seem surprised that she's so strong, and I think there's a culture of wanting to see 'soft' women all the time that really annoys me. It's incredible that a man at that time could write a woman as complex and subtle as Pegeen.

A lot of people have a problem with how she turns on Christy at the end but I think she's so vulnerable and so scared about opening her heart, that when he's outed as a liar, she just shuts down again because it's such a huge betrayal.



### **How did you approach developing the character?**

The language is the way in for this play, it reveals everything to you. Language in this community is a sort of currency, it's the only thing that these people have, and all their riches are invested in the way that they talk, and that's incredibly Irish. In Ireland, your character worth is judged by how good a storyteller you are. Also, the Irish landscape and the characters' relationships with the earth and nature really get into your subconscious. Pegeen is a beautiful character but there's a wind bitten quality to her.

### **Do you feel that playing Pegeen presents a specific challenge to you as an Irish actress?**

Yes I do, but I wish I didn't feel like that. I feel like a reluctant ambassador. I'm not trying to do the definitive Pegeen. With a play that's so loved, people all have their own ideas about what they want the character to be. I always seem to pick roles that people have an emotional attachment to but what I don't ever want to be as an actress is 'safe'.

### **How have younger audiences been responding to the play?**

I think a lot of people are a bit baffled by the language at first because it's quite dense and intricate – but then so is Shakespeare. But they enjoy the spectacle very much. Theatregoing is like a muscle that you develop. My mum used to have to drag me to the theatre and it was something I had to get the hang of. You have to work a bit more in the theatre. You have to stay alert and listen a bit more but that's not a bad thing.

### **What will you take away with you from this process?**

I really like finding interesting women and it's really hard to find roles that don't sideline you. There's a joy that I find playing Pegeen, speaking Synge's words, and I think that he saw that the Irish girls weren't just lovely Irish girls.

### **If someone told you fifteen years ago that one day you would be doing this, would you have believed them?**

Yes. I don't mean that in a pompous way but I was very determined. In many ways I was very naïve but I just had this blind belief that if I worked hard enough I would definitely get there. I never assumed it would be at The Old Vic! I thought maybe it would be somewhere in a town hall in deepest darkest Limerick where I'm from. But I knew that in some capacity, I would get there. I think as an actor you can never let anybody take that determination away from you.

## IN CONVERSATION WITH ROBERT SHEEHAN

**This is your first professional stage role. How is the process different from your previous work in film and television?**

There are almost no similarities between the two but I haven't found it at all stressful. Except perhaps in the sense that we've put so much work into it and it feels like it will never be truly conquered. On television, you perform a role and immortalise it on to a tape but on stage you do it, then you redo it and re-find the meaning behind the words every single time you say them. For the last eight years of my life I've done nothing but TV and film and I think acting in theatre makes you a more comfortable actor. It reminds you what it is to actually be in a scene properly, without having the distraction of a film set that can sometimes take you entirely out of the reality you're trying to create. This is acting at its purest.



**Were you nervous about opening night?**

No, not really, I found it thrilling. We've had five weeks of rehearsing and rehearsing and rehearsing. In the last week we ran the show six or seven times! So I never felt unprepared. When rehearsals started, I'd just been to see Kevin Spacey in Richard III. He came to see us and told us that, for him, being onstage is like riding a tornado. You have no tangible memory of each performance; the adrenaline tends to pump and you just power through. Sometimes people ask me if I've got stage fright but the answer's always no! In my experience, I'm almost too relaxed onstage. The only thing I do sometimes get nervous about is corpsing, which I have now done, but luckily it was near the end of a scene so I was able to run off stage!

**What drew you to taking the role of Christy Mahon in this production?**

It was everything about this project - the prospect of working at The Old Vic; doing this part, in this play, which John Crowley describes as the 'seminal mothership of Irish theatre'. And I couldn't have hoped for a better director than John, so there was nothing about it that didn't attract me. I was delighted when the idea came round.

**Did you know the play beforehand?**

I saw it years ago when I was about 15. I was probably too young and my attention span was too short to fully appreciate the play but I remember seeing it and thinking 'Imagine trying to learn that play!' just because of the sheer volume of the language. But I knew that Christy Mahon was one of the most difficult and challenging parts that a young Irishman could ever be given, which is exactly why I wanted to have a go with it

**What do you think younger audiences – particularly first-time theatregoers – will make of this play?**

I don't know what they're going to make of it. If they're with us all the way through, I'll be delighted. We've had a lot of Misfits fans at the show and it's great when you look out to the audience and see a load of teenagers. Most of the time they understand it but it is a challenge because it is quite dense and the language can be a bit jarring. It's an enjoyable play and as it goes on, you can feel the crowd's silences and hear their laughter. The Misfits fans have been a part of that, so they must have understood it too.

**Now that you've had your first stage experience, are there any other theatre roles you'd like to tackle?**

There's an Irish play called The Empress of India by Stuart Carolan, which I saw when I was 16. It's a beautiful play – still one of my favourites – and I would love to play the young guy in that.

**What advice would you give to young actors wanting to pursue a career in theatre?**

My main advice would be to always warm up and never rush. In my preparation for this, I worked with a voice coach and learned how not to strain my voice. By the end of the play I'm snarling and screaming and during previews I was straining my voice. So I've had to work quite a bit to remind my body how to breathe and how to cry like a baby, instead of putting strain on my voice box.

**What will you take away from this process?**

Knowing this play from start to finish. I will never not know this play now. It's so emblazoned on my brain that I think for the rest of my life I'll be able to remember sections of it and say them out loud, which I think is beautiful.

## IN CONVERSATION WITH... THOUGHTS FROM THE CAST

### What was your response to the play when you first read it?

**Gwendolen Chatfield (Honor):** I was completely taken aback by the lyricism of the language and have to confess I needed to read it again before I completely grasped the story.

**John Cormack (Bellman):** Being Irish, it's very close to my heart, so it was a joy to revisit it after many years.

**Frank Laverty (Michael James):** I've known the play for a long time but when I read it this time, it really struck me how lyrical the language is, almost like Shakespeare.

**Diarmuid de Faoite (Jimmy Farrell):** I was taken with the lyricism and the amount of Irish phraseology that's directly translated and/or heightened into English.

**Gary Lydon (Old Mahon):** I was intoxicated by the language and found it very moving.

### Some people would say the play is a comedy, others a tragedy. What do you think?

**Karen Cogan (Nelly):** Irish people have no problem finding laughter in tragic times. I think the ending is tragic but the proceedings and skewed morals are comic.

**Grainne Keenan (Sara):** You can't deny the black humour in it but equally it's ultimately a tragic love story.

**Kevin Trainor (Shawn):** In its construction and with the wild energy at the heart of it, I'd say it's more in comic territory. Perhaps a tragicomedy or melodrama?

**Drew Dillon (Musician/Understudy Christy):** I think Synge has balanced both beautifully. It is very funny but that is met with some heartbreaking moments. That's what makes it so special.

**Gary Lydon (Old Mahon):** It is very funny but the characters aren't aware they are being funny, they just speak. It is sad in some ways too.

**James Greene (Philly O'Cullen):** Mainly comedy – black, dark comedy perhaps. A tragedy for Pegeen. But there is no 'loving-kindness' in the play. Romantic love, sexuality and cruelty.

### Tell us a bit about the character you play.

**Grainne Keenan (Sara):** She's a ballsy girl who has a ravenous appetite for stories of blood and murder, so Christy is a jewel to her!

**Frank Laverty (Michael James):** He's not the best father in the world! He's only interested in drinking with his mates and only too glad to get Pegeen married off ASAP!

**Diarmuid de Faoite (Jimmy Farrell):** Jimmy, Phillp and Michael are 'The 3 Amigos', sharing an interest in drinking, gaiety and some business interests.



### The County Mayo accent required for the play is very specific. How easy has the accent been for you?

**Karen Cogan (Nelly):** It is a balancing act between being authentic and being clear and understood. The writing is poetry and must be heard and put across clearly but the accent is an important facet of the poetry.

**Gwendolen Chatfield (Honor):** Being the only non-Irish cast member meant that I was lucky enough to have a session with a dialect coach and we very specifically looked at the Mayo accent.

**Kevin Trainor (Shawn):** Not easy but some of the cast are from the West of Ireland and have been very helpful. It is a theatrical depiction of the Mayo accent that we aim at – not perfect accuracy.

**Drew Dillon (Musician/Understudy Christy):** I listened as much as I could to my fellow actors. The challenge lay in making it authentic but allowing a largely British audience in.

### What are the biggest challenges you have faced in rehearsals for this show?

**Karen Cogan (Nelly):** It's quite epic. These are big people with huge feelings and reactions. It's been a challenge to keep sight of this and be truthful.

**Kevin Trainor (Shawn):** Trying to avoid slipping into caricature – a daily battle.

**John Cormack (Bellman):** Playing the guitar and singing on stage with other people who are proper musicians – I've loved it!

**Diarmuid de Faoite (Jimmy Farrell):** Not getting fazed by the scale of the production.

**Gary Lydon (Old Mahon):** Making the language come from within.

**James Greene (Philly O'Cullen):** We worked hard at trying to get the wonderful poetic language of the play as clean as possible. And the comedy. Comedy is harder than tragedy!

### What have you enjoyed most about the process?

**Gwendolen Chatfield (Honor):** Working with Philip Chevron and the other musicians on all of the musical parts of the show. We even have a name for our band – "The Shifts" – look out for us busking in Covent Garden!

**Drew Dillon (Musician/Understudy Christy):** Working with such a phenomenal team. I had seen many of John and Scott's productions before and was a fan! Also, working for the legendary Old Vic Theatre – it's the most magical theatre.

**James Greene (Philly O'Cullen):** Working with this very talented young company has been, and is, a joy for me.

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