

Helen Buckley's

Leisure Page

YOUNG, agile, aesthetic looking, intellectually and temperamentally an arts devotee and a person with two causes—the placing of culture, in its broadest terms, in the fundamental pivot of Irish life, and the attainment of social and remunerative recognition for the acting profession—Kevin McHugh is today one of the leading personalities of the Irish stage.

Born and brought up in Limerick, this intense portrayer of drama made no irrevocable decision to become an actor but from adolescence onwards realised that his forte lay in the artistic bower.

A resident of Garryowen, and later of Belfield Gardens and a member of a family of six whose father was a Civic Guard, Kevin attended the local CBS ("I went to school there and was educated later") before going on to UCG where he studied for a BA degree and became involved in the college dramatic society. Having taken his degree in philosophy and English he stayed on at university to do post graduate work on Eugene O'Neill and during this period of academic dalliance his future was decided for him.

"I was", he told me, when I met him at the 'in' R.T.E. tavern, Madigans of Donnybrook, script in hand after a day's feverish rehearsal, "asked to do a play in Dublin, Whistle In The Dark by Tom Murphy. Jim Fitzgerald had seen me in amateur dramatics in college and asked me to play a part in the Dublin production."

No access

And so, through no concerted effort or conviction of his own, Kevin McHugh was inducted into Irish dramatic history.

"I had", he said, "no conscious thought of going on the stage. I knew I could act but there was no access to the profession... there still isn't any access today. Having the idea of becoming an actor then was a very strange ambition... it was not an ambition really; one felt that the arts and the area of the arts would be involved in it no matter what one did. And having been asked to play in a play and be an actor I became an actor that day."

Explaining why he originally took English and philosophy in U.C.G. and outlining, as he saw it, the cultural famine which permeated the depressed Ireland of the '30s, Kevin McHugh went on: "It was in the late '30s and the arts in Ireland at the time were very demoralised and very separate from the people."

"Most of the writers were banned and those who still lived... or existed... in the country had been driven into pubs and isolated by society—actually the Government more than society. Paddy Kavanagh was ostracised and vilified; even Eibhlin got somewhat the same treatment."

"The arts are not accepted in their full function even today. They are still not accepted. Government representatives make certain gestures, but the gestures are not really in the European idea."

At the time he "joined" U.C.G. "there seemed", said the present day actor, "to be a bourgeoisie of people who didn't want to emigrate easily... they seemed to want to have some artistic values placed in Ireland. Irishmen not structured by the educational factor of the Irish language and by nationalism. I went to U.C.G. because I wanted to stay and be a part of this."

To London

Though the young McHugh's school acting attempts had petered into nullity by the time he reached his teens and did not come to the fore again until his college days, within a year of his invitation to play in Dublin, he was on the London stage: "I started in Dublin in the autumn with the company, and did three or four others afterwards, and in the spring went to London with Stephen D."

For "about six years" he "sort of commuted between London and Dublin—in London doing mostly T.V. and radio, I was with the B.B.C. 'Rep.' for six months and left then... with no real regrets on either side."

The reason? "I found it was like being in a large prep school. I felt that actors were artists and should have enough scope. There wasn't enough asked of them to fulfil themselves there, so I left."

Kevin McHugh felt no trepidation about abandoning the security offered by the B.B.C. Repertory Company, "after all", he said, "I left the security of the Abbey afterwards in Ireland, and I could have stayed with them."

His career continued in London with television and general freelancing, however, until finally he decided to return to Ireland.

Contrary to the public idea that every actor's dream is to end up on the stage of the British capital, Kevin McHugh said "I never really had any ambition to stay in London. I wished to see Dublin face its own country rather than London."

"When I was in London I saw that Dublin basically faced London for cultural ideas and I wanted to come back and lead the charge towards our own culture."

And what level of success did he feel he had achieved? "... I'll put it this way, the charge is still on and I don't

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Return

McHugh's first role on his return to Ireland in 1970 was in *It's A Two Foot Six Inch*. Above *The Ground World*, "I left it to do a TV film on Synge and have carried on since."

Despite his pluralist attitude towards Irish society he has no plans for returning to Britain on a permanent basis: "I haven't changed residence since I have been back and I have no intention of doing so—unless I'm driven out again, unless they institute a lockdown on culture as they did in the '50s—and, even then, no, I would stay and fight anyway."

Speaking cheerfully on his own acting and specifically on which of his roles had proved most challenging, the spirited rebel personality said: "At this stage there are about three or four roles which I would claim I felt I contributed to by creating a type of character."

"Now I am faced with another which I find a great challenge. It is a TV film called *Siege* by Eugene McCarthy and is certainly the best film script I've ever read. It is a three-part series; the first part which is called *Cancer* and has gone out, most people have seen. Part two, *Heritage*, has been done but has not been shown yet. *Siege* is the last part."

"It is all about Northern Ireland, written anachronically, and I think it will be the major document on Northern Ireland in this period. I have no doubt about it. It is scaring and really brilliant."

The blame

On the opposite end of the scales, Kevin McHugh dealt with his reaction to the parts he enjoyed least. "There were two times... I would wish any actor to have to go through them. I was so bad that I felt there was no way I could walk on that stage the following night... it was so bad—but, of course, I had to."

McHugh attributed the blame for these bad performances to "bad situation and bad production... I taught me a great deal about how to prepare for work—how to allow the attitude of the director to dominate what you, as an actor, want to do."

There is no particular type of drama—tragedy, comedy, etc.—in which Kevin McHugh would like to specialise. "I think, generally", he said, "that I don't mind which type of play I act in, as long as the play itself has some excitement and value."

Neither does he see himself as belonging to any particular school or style of acting. "I think today that the question of type casting for me doesn't really matter. I've played during the last four or five years in *Brief Lives* (a one-man play about a seventeenth century man), *Look Back In Anger*, *The Homecoming*, *The Man Who Almost Knew Eamonn Andrews* and *Call Me Davy*—which has just finished at the Talbot in Wexford. I have covered most areas."

This mode of acting, continued McHugh, was a dilemma which was fairly endemic to theatre in Ireland: "Irish actors, unlike 90 per cent of English actors, have got to be more versatile because to have continued in the theatre in this country you have got to play foreign plays, native plays, European, American and English plays, whereas English actors concentrate on one brand."

"You do a play in the West

End and it probably lasts for two years. Here, the year before last, I did ten plays, all different, plus a couple of T.V.s, plus radio."

And when that much is demanded of a man, financial reward automatically enters the discussion. "For that sort of mental work and for the demands which are set for an actor, I don't think the amount of money available for actors in this country is sufficient."

"I don't think people realise this. Even young, good actors in the Abbey are so overworked that eventually some, just some, of their performances suffer."

"I discovered this in the Abbey myself. The standards demanded to-day in T.V., or in anything, are very high. This doesn't mean that the actors are less good. But the experience level of the audience is much higher than 20 years ago and they don't always get what they are expecting then."

In his own career, Kevin McHugh, an absolute free-lance, is geared chiefly towards the defined role of the dramatic actor: "I'm a straight actor... I'm an actor; I'm a curious breed. I define myself as somebody who would wish to work in ways in his own behalf and own desire. I would like to do quality work and not to be pressured economically to do things I don't want to do."

Did circumstances sometimes force him to abandon this criterion?

"Sometimes... sometimes I do it; sometimes I don't. Mostly the pressures are economic other than artistic; I'd like to see the reverse."

Pressures

The problems and pressures confronting the actor in Ireland did not apply to his theatrical counterpart in Britain and Europe, again, emphasised McHugh in qualification. "The difference between Europe, Britain and Ireland is that in Europe and Britain you have a situation, basically, where the actor is trained to a position which he holds and in which he has security. He is trained to function sheerly as a performer. Here they demand more, and the audience demand more, than automatic productions of a type. In other countries, Germany, for example, you have writers writing a certain type of work; it is abstract and more technical and on a less large sphere."

"Here, you start on a different level, on who's a human being and how does he relate to society."

Our writers write plays which don't demand a structured response from the actor; they demand an individual response. Kevin McHugh's ambition—"general ambition"—is to "see the arts in Ireland, and I include all the arts, become a part of our own culture."

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Window-dressing

"The arts have been given very little encouragement—a little window-dressing like tax relief to its contributors—most of whom never reached

tax level. It favoured emigres from other countries and it did give some emphasis to people's minds that the artist was an important member of the community."

But: "Unless the country has a look at its artists and unless it includes its artists in its philosophy and its society it will become a dead end."

Kevin McHugh had an even more ominous message: "Unless it does these things we may even become a country where violence is dominant, because the arts, by the very nature of the people who go about it, are critical of society. And their examination of our society is very valuable. If humour lets off steam in society then the arts create a groundwork for society to build on."

On the very basic point of financial reward for actors Kevin McHugh stated tersely and emphatically: "The cheapest theatre in the world is in Ireland... and obviously it was not appreciated... When Irish people see something in Dublin their expectation is that the same show will be better in the West End of London. This is not true. In fact, at the moment, at least 60 per cent of equivalent type plays put on in the West End are done better here."

But were there not some Irish actors receiving good incomes from these high-class performances?

"No, this isn't true. And there is no reason why we should have a society which makes the artist a lesser earner than a solicitor."

What of the ancillary financial benefits accruing to the profession through such means as advertising, commercials and promotions?

"This is not spread across the profession and is not as good as it looks. Too many commercials lose you credibility in plays and you wouldn't be cast."

The rewards which acting offer Kevin McHugh are: satisfaction and fulfilment. "To him, the joy of his profession is "when working on a script, getting the idea and excitement of creation, and creating something which you know will last. You also get across the message of the ills of society."

If he had not entered the theatre Kevin McHugh feels that, if not his destiny, certainly his desire, would have lain in the literary sphere: "I don't know if I would have had the real discipline for writing. There is a difference between an actor and a writer. A writer can do it on his own. Acting is a public skill. Writing is a private skill. I suppose I would have taken up writing. I would hope to be able to discipline myself to write."

Did he do any writing in a private capacity?

"Only for therapy"—no further enlargement except: "When I was very young I wrote poetry... didn't we all?"

When asked if he ever regretted his adoption of career, Kevin McHugh replied: "No, in the sense you ask the question," and with a sudden aura of spirit displayed in his physiognomy, contrasting with an equally fast change to a softly semi-lethal tone of voice, continued: "I do, in the sense that sometimes I like to attack the people who employ me and ask 'why do you earn a lot of money every week when your job is to use me, yet you are paid merely to hire me?' In T.V. a massive amount of people are paying a

small amount to others to do programmes..."

Interview

Going further on the "cancer kernel" the actor said: "I was interviewed on an R.T.E. programme on *The Lot Of The Actor* recently and it was censored because I mentioned figures which I had collected which some director had given to me."

"My entire interview was taken out of the programme without even consulting me. I was fairly critical of R.T.E.; I was fairly critical of the money that was paid out."

"Of the total income of R.T.E. 60 per cent goes on salaries; something in the region of 27 to 29 per cent on facilities and 12 to 13 per cent on programmes. Some of the programmes, such as producers, fire lancers, fees to people appearing on public affairs programmes and the cost of sets, etc., would actually be included in the percentage of programmes."

"Three-quarters of a million pounds goes to subsistence—hotel bills, etc., for crews and personnel... but we still haven't got a proper drama budget... which we are fighting for."

At 35 years of age, Kevin McHugh lives in Blackrock, Co. Dublin, with his Irish actress British wife and two children (there is another on the way). He married while living in London and finds that his wife "loves Limerick and wouldn't return to London for anything."

Of his original family, his mother, Mrs. Mary McHugh, still lives in Belfield Gardens, Limerick, and Kevin retains through his brother, T. J. McHugh, "present Cork City Manager."

Boyhood

Recalling his boyhood days in Limerick, Kevin says that his memories have been tempered by "later thinking. I don't remember those days being either difficult or different... I just grew up in a place. I was never conscious about it. My feeling for Limerick is one of nostalgia and affection. I might have had affection if my family had been from Limerick but my father was from Leitrim, and his mother from Limerick. The rest of the family were born in Galway."

"I have very vivid memories of Limerick. I remember running down the street after my mother to a Mrs. Griffin—she didn't have a radio—the day the war ended, to tell her."

But: "Although I was reared in Limerick there was no outlet for my career there, and though I have a lot of curious feeling for the place it is because I was reared there; I haven't any more feeling for it than anywhere else. It doesn't mean any more than anywhere else in Ireland to me."

"I do feel sometimes a sense of proprietary when people start attacking Limerick and say, 'and I don't know what it is all about, that it is an old cliché'."

On the general criticisms of Limerick—conservatism, snobishness, etc., and why they should apply solely to Limerick and not to other provincial cities?

"I think there are differences between Limerick, Galway and Cork. Galway is a bit more open, being a university city. I have a long ancient notion belonging to the prevention of the arts, and the censorship of writers in Ireland over a period of

thirty years or more..."

"In one way or another the arts were available in the capital. Though the artists were not allowed to speak directly to the public they remained in Dublin, if only shouting and roaring from pubs."

"This has affected the provinces. The provinces were starved of an intellectual outlet—doctors and lawyers had it—there was talk about it in golf clubs—but it didn't filter down to the people it was meant for."

In Galway it filtered a little being a university town. But Limerick didn't have a university."

In Limerick you also had the repressive attitude of the confraternity which looked on art as if it should be propaganda for a cause, rather than something which should make people look at themselves. The confraternity looked on people as part-time citizens and full-time Catholics."

"Galway was always a more genteel city. It had a genteel attitude, despite the fact that it probably has the worst bishop Ireland ever had..."

Also, Galway (certainly very dear to its ex-freshman) was never a Garrison city. Limerick, Cork, Sligo, Dublin and Wexford were."

Limerick versus Cork: "I suppose Cork... well, there is a certainness in Cork. They have never wished to be part of the rest of Ireland, and have an identity which they guard very well, and to a large degree, correctly... they were not so sensitive about it, they don't need to be."

The résumé: "Galway is not defensive; Cork is, unnecessarily; Limerick is a little

The left

Expanding further on the geographical venue of his formative years, Kevin McHugh felt that "in Limerick at this moment you have probably the cross culture of Ireland. You have probably the most articulate left wing protagonists who will refuse to move out. And at the same time you have a massive back-log of socialists."

Within the past few years Kevin McHugh has appeared in three productions in Limerick: *Inside Lives*; *Da* and *The Lark*. McHugh's philosophy in life is "to aim at making my work and values, and my family, integrate."

Kevin considers himself a family man, but agrees that if he were made a professional offer which appealed to him aesthetically and necessitated leaving home and family for a period he would accept. It would, however, have to be sufficiently well paid to allow his family to live in my absence, or to allow me to bring them with me."

When he is working away from home, which is very seldom, luckily, I usually take my family with me; the only place I don't take my wife and family is to Belfast."

I worked quite a bit in Belfast and it was lovely up to a few months ago. Over the past five years I have been doing work for the BBC there and have found a tremendous change. Five years ago they were sad but relaxed people, now they are frightened and tense."

Cooking

When Kevin McHugh is seeking release from his own tensions and refuge from the mundanities of everyday life he turns his attention to a "hobby" which is becoming increasingly a male preoccupation but is not something

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