Jews of Limerick

John Barrett, author of a play on the Limerick pogroms which opens tonight, talks to **Helen Meany** about the events on which the play is based

Skeletons in the cupboard

IT was Leopold Bloom who blazed the trail. Joyce's genial anti-hero makes a remark in *Ulysses* that despatched John Barrett to the recesses of the National Library. "And I belong to a race too that is hated and persecuted" is the line that prompted this mild-mannered UCD academic to sift through documents relating to the persecution of Limerick's small but well-established Jewish community in 1904 (the year in which *Ulysses* is set).

The result, *Borrowed Robes*, is being premièred by Island Theatre company at the Belltable Arts Centre, Limerick, this week, directed by Terry Devlin. The final version of a play that has had a 10-year gestation period, it dramatises the story of the Catholic priest, Father Creagh, who instigated the boycott of all Jewish businesses in Limerick. In a series of highly inflammatory sermons, which were also published in the local press, he whipped his congregation into a frenzy of anti-Semitism. Assaults, abuse, burnings and lootings accompanied the economic boycott, making it impossible for Jewish families to remain in the city and, after two years, almost all of them had left. The disturbances were the subject of articles and correspondence in the national press and attracted the attention of, among others, Michael Davitt (supporting the Jews) and Arthur Griffith (supporting the boycott).

Father Creagh was the highly respected director of the Arch-Confraternity of the Holy Family in Limerick, which had a membership of 5,000 men and 2,000 boys, and was run with authoritarian zeal. His great influence, combined with fears that Catholic businesses were being undercut by Jewish ones, fuelled the campaign. Father Creagh's claims that, in a period of unemployment and poverty, Jews were becoming conspicuously prosperous, stimulated the latent xenophobia of a small, socially and culturally homogeneous community.

"The Limerick pogrom", as it is known, is a deeply disturbing incident in our history in this century, and John Barrett thinks that the play's appearance now is timely, as hostile attitudes towards immigrants are surfacing again. "But it is not a socio-political tract," he stresses, sitting over coffee in Galway. "It's a fictionalised account that goes way beyond the recorded facts. It focuses on the human story, asking the central question of how this priest, who was generally charitable and caring, could suddenly launch such a vicious attack on the Jews. What was his motivation?"

An earlier version of the play, which was given to the Abbey for consideration, was "a drama-documentary with a lot of satire," Barrett says. "As I reworked it, my sense of the character of the priest developed and it became much more interesting. I decided to go all out for a personal story." He created an intense, pious, sexually repressed character, Father Keane, (to be played by John Anthony Murphy), whose inadmissible attraction to a young Jewish widow, Sarah Levin (played by Eileen Kennedy) is the source of his passionate denunciation of the Jews. When one of the novices in his charge leaves the seminary because he has fallen in love, he takes refuge in Sarah Levin's boarding house. Father Keane's jealousy is inflamed and his unfulfilled desires become twisted into hatred and fear.

"He's off-balance and, after the recent death of his mother, is enormously vulnerable," Barrett says.

In a series of minimally staged, short, overlapping scenes, the tension builds towards the violent outcome. All the actors remain on stage throughout the play, sitting on benches and doubling up as clerical assistants or members of Father Keane's congregation — further emphasising the inter-connections between characters in this close-knit, oppressive society.

"It's hard for us to appreciate the sheer power of the confraternity at that time," Barrett says. "The director had control over the lives of the members. If someone didn't attend the meetings, a prefect would call to the house with his little black book, demanding an explanation. Its tentacles were everywhere; it functioned like the Mafia, really, looking after its members with jobs and homes and demanding loyalty in return."

IT'S hardly surprising, in such a context, that the anti-Semitic campaign was so devastatingly successful. Barrett has based Father Keane's sermons in the play on those of Father Creagh but has toned them down considerably. "The originals are just too offensive to quote directly. Some people in the Jewish community here have expressed wariness about this play being produced, because it might stir up dormant feelings. But I think it's important to examine this period." He welcomes drama that takes things seriously, that reflects our history and society. "Theatre doesn't have to be political but it should deal with human situations."

Coming shortly after Patricia Burke-Brogan's play, *Eclipsed*, which opens next week at Andrew's Lane, Dublin, which explored the experiences of women condemned to live in Magdalene laundaries, *Borrowed Robes* could be viewed as part of an impulse towards the examination of buried wounds that is currently evident in this country. In public and private, in the arts and political domains, people are delving into the shadowy, painful aspects of our culture and trying to come to terms with the legacy of repression, institutionalised cruelty, abuse of children — both sexual and emotional — and the demonisation of women.

"Yes, Ireland seems to be going through a cleansing process, a kind of collective catharsis, which I hope is leading to resolution," Barrett says. "The things that happen in this play could never happen in the same way now. The role of the church has changed so much. Everything is being opened up and they can't tell lies any more.

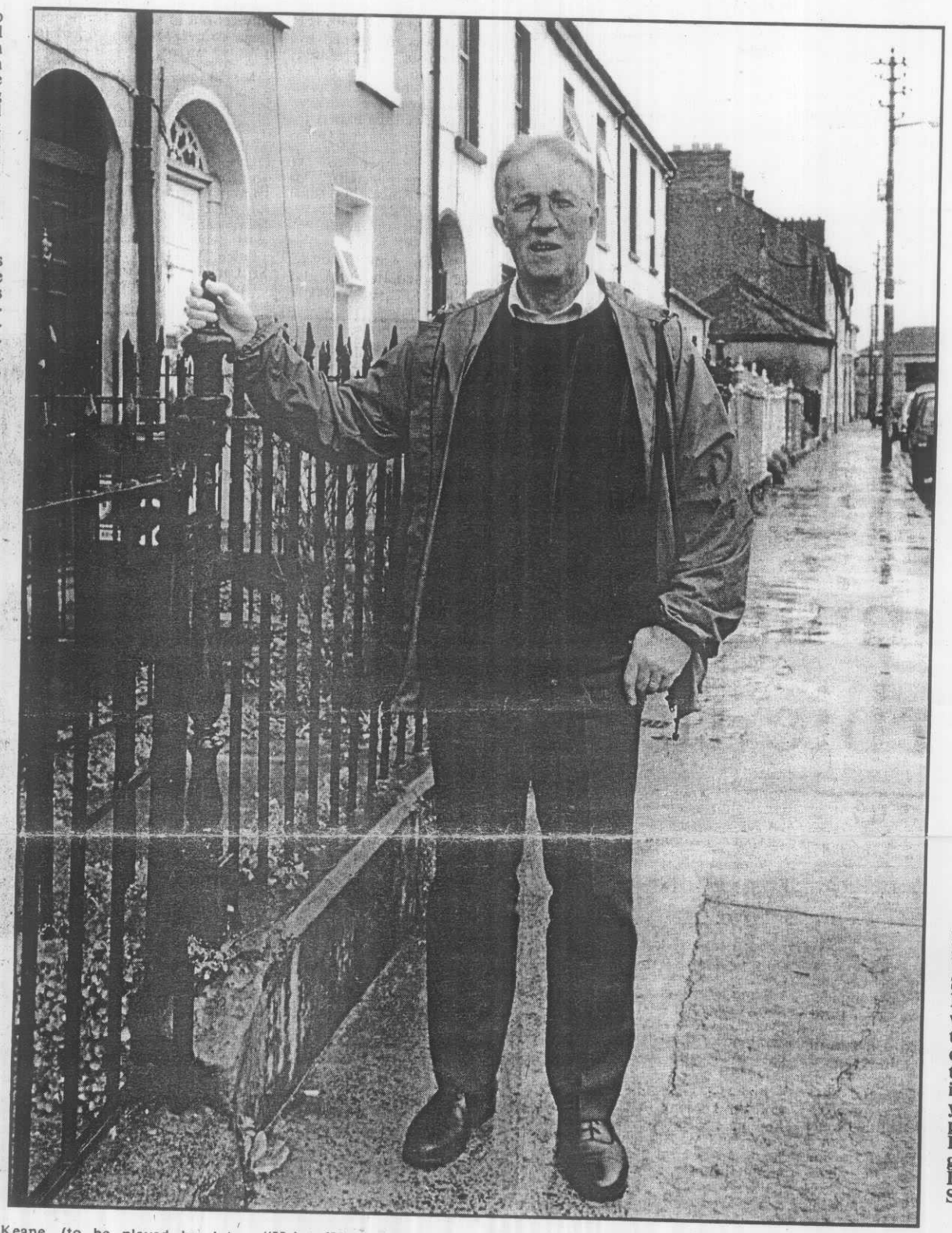
"Certainly, the distrust and fear of foreigners is still there but it's impossible to imagine a priest being at the centre of a violently racist campaign. This is not an anti-clerical play. It shows the church in a very bad light, of course, but the episode is nothing to be proud of and the boycott lasted for two whole years. The play is anti-fanatical; it sets out to expose values."

Borrowed Robes is an intense, dramatic work, which is "essentially about priestly celibacy", Barrett says, "and the damage caused by the obsession with sexuality. When the novice, Michael, leaves, saying that the life in the seminary is not natural, that's what he means. So much of the sexual abuse stemmed from the enforced celibacy, which also led to a lot of wasted lives, people who left the priesthood because they could not endure it — and these are often the more sensitive people."

If the dilemmas and struggles at the heart of this play seem particularly immediate, it is because they have the ring of authenticity. John Barrett had completed five out of 12 years of his Jesuit training in the late 1950s when he came to "the rational decision" to leave. Now married with six children, he acknowledges the enormous cultural influence of Catholicism, but is not religious. "I don't accept the authority of churches: I object to the claim of having a single truth in all circumstances. But I still have a strong interest in spirituality. I have found what I need."

Then, suddenly turning the tables and confirming his former calling, he asks quietly: "And what about you? What do you believe?"

● Borrowed Robes *opens tonight at the Belltable Arts Centre, Limerick.*



John Barrett in Wolfe Tone Street, Limerick, which was the Jewish quarter of the city in 1904, the year of the pogroms. Photograph: David Sleator

Reviews

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