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Mayor Joe Leddin at the launch in City Hall of the DVD tribute to writer and Sugawn Theatre founder Jerry O'Neill, with Mr O'Neill's wife, Mary, and family friend, Doris Daly (LL)

Limerick man who founded Irish theatre is honoured

By CLODAGH O'LEARY

ONE of Limerick's most talented sons will be commemorated in London next month for his contribution to literary history.

Jerry O'Neill, distinguished playwright and founder of the Sugawn Theatre in Islington, was acknowledged by Mayor Joe Leddin this week in City Hall.

And a locally-produced DVD chronicling the life of Mr O'Neill was also launched this Monday.

Paying tribute to the late playwright, Mayor Leddin said: "Limerick has a proud and distinguished record with regard to the arts and culture over many years, and has produced many fine writers, from Kate O'Brien to Cristoir

O'Floinn, Michael Curtin, Jim Kemmy and Frank McCourt, to name but a few.

"This launch is a tribute to Jerry O'Neill, another of Limerick's great sons, a man who despite leaving his home city of Limerick as a young man, Jerry never forgot his roots."

Mr O'Neill met his wife, Mary, while on holidays in Kilkee in 1948 and married a year later.

They moved to London in the 1950s where he worked in Barclays Bank, specialising in colonial banking. From there, the family were posted to West Africa.

They returned to England in the Sixties, and in 1967 he became the tenant landlord of the Duke of Wellington pub in the Ball's Pond Road in Islington. There he established the Sugawn Theatre.

In 1980 he left the pub

trade and wrote a number of plays and four novels. During this time he received two Irish Post / AIB awards. Throughout his career he was referred to as "the laureate of the London Irish".

"His books brought to light a strange dark world of the Irish in London, and novels like Canon Bang Bang, Duffy is Dead and Open Cut, set new literary standards for Irish writers," said Mayor Leddin.

In the final years, he moved to Kilkee, where he wrote Bennett & Company. Shortly before he died in 1999, he was awarded the Kerry Ingredients Book of the Year Award.

Mrs O'Neill was deeply moved by Monday's commemoration.

"It is a pity he is not alive to see this, but I am sure that he is very happy looking down on us

today. I am overjoyed that after all these years, his home city have taken the time to remember him in this way," she said.

A commemorative plaque will be unveiled on the site of the Sugawn Theatre on October 14. The announcement was made by Doris Daly of the Sugawn committee, who said that Mr O'Neill's works ushered in an era of communication, mutual respect and understanding in a time of suspicion and distrust when the Irish were getting a bad press.

The DVD—A Tribute to Jerry O'Neill—features music by Limerick group Burning Embers; a poem by well-known Limerick poet John Liddy is also included and the photographs were taken by Denis John.

For more information on the DVD log onto www.sugawntheatrememorial.com

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