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City's masters of the craft

An exhibition of sailing dinghies at St Mary's Cathedral is part of a revival of boatbuilding skills in Limerick, **Mike Dwane** writes

In Ireland, there has traditionally been too rigorous a division between art and crafts, according to Minister for Finance, Michael Noonan. "I always thought that not enough credit was given to people who can do things with their hands and are very expert in crafts. Art, and culture, is not something highfalutin' for a small elite group but there is a much wider concept where the artist and the craftsman come together," the minister said in opening an exhibition at St Mary's Cathedral of wooden sailing dinghies built at the AK Ilen Boat-Building School at the LEDP in Roxboro.

President Michael D Higgins and his wife Sabina were among the visitors to St Mary's to see them this week.

The exhibition of the CityOne fleet - four vessels in all - is supported by Limerick City of Culture, which also backed the Gandelow Races earlier in the year. Those traditional Limerick fishing cots were also built at the AK Ilen School, some of them even making it as far as Venice in April,

where the Limerick gandelows were berthed alongside the local gondolas from which they may or may not derive their name.

Minister Noonan has been supportive of the work of the boatbuilding school for some time.

"It was amazing to see the skills that were still embedded in the community of craftsmen"

Michael Noonan
Minister for Finance

"In the old Krups factory, it was amazing to see the skills that were still embedded in the Limerick community of craftsmen; the way they could still turn their hand to the turning of wood, to manufacture the gandelows and to develop this fleet of sailing boats," the minister said.

"The old names associated with fishing and with seafaring in Limerick were there working

on the boats and I would like to congratulate all the boatbuilders for the fantastic work they have done and congratulate their instructors as well, particularly Gary MacMahon, who has long been associated with seafaring in this city."

And it is Mr MacMahon, a graphic and web designer who runs the Copper Reed Studio in the city, who is making the survival of these old Limerick boatbuilding skills possible through founding the AK Ilen School.

It is named after the ketch designed by Limerick sailor and republican Conor O'Brien in 1926. Falkland Islanders had been so impressed with the Saoirse, the boat in which O'Brien had circumnavigated the globe, that they had commissioned a similar vessel for themselves - the AK Ilen.

Out of service by 1998, it was Gary MacMahon who had arranged for the boat to be brought back from Port Stanley - and it is currently being restored on the Ilen River near Baltimore.

And it was out of this project

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Minister for Finance Michael Noonan with AK Ilen directors Br Anthony Keane, Glenstal, and Gary MacMahon at the City One exhibition in St Mary's

New masters of ancient craft

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that the Roxboro school was born. Not only does it build boats but provides training to young people with community and voluntary groups in Limerick.

And these teenagers had even helped the more seasoned hands in producing the City One fleet.

"This is highly technical stuff so the experienced guys who have been with us for a number of years have done most of the work," explained Mr MacMahon.

"But some of the younger kids were also involved in the preparation of timber for this. It's not so much that we teach skills as much as that people are in an environment of quality and, almost through osmosis, they learn about quality through seeing other people doing it. It's not that we teach them some prescribed skills. It's very important that when they come into a convivial environment like the Ilen School, they can see inspirational things going on. That is immeasurable but it is potent and it is valid."

The CityOne fleet are on display at St Mary's until October 11, appropriately enough alongside the O'Brien Chapel named after Conor O'Brien's distinguished family.

There may be a debate within Fine Gael on the legacy of 1916 but Minister Noonan, for one, was happy to pay tribute to Conor O'Brien, the man who played such a central role in the plot to smuggle guns in for the Volunteers ahead of the Rising.

"The O'Briens were on Foynes Island, which makes them neighbours of mine. Conor is buried in the little local graveyard beside our family home in Mount Trenchard. Of course, he is mentioned frequently now in the history of Ireland as we come towards the anniversary of 1916 because it was he and Lord Montague's sister, Mary Spring Rice, who were the people in Limerick who were involved in the Howth gun-running. They had what was called the decoy yacht while Mr Childers was



President Michael D Higgins and his wife Sabina were among the visitors to the City One exhibition at St Mary's Cathedral and are pictured here with Tim O'Riordan, AK Ilen crew member, listening to brother Anthony Keane, AK Ilen director

delivering the guns into Howth," the Minister said.

And while the minister showed no embarrassment over 1916, he did seem a little bashful when Brother Anthony Keane of Glenstal Abbey, a director of the AK Ilen School, paid warm tribute to him for his support for their project and, more generally, for navigating Ireland out of an economic maelstrom.

And this, seemingly, was one minister who could teach even a monk a thing or two about austerity, if the minister's 6am breakfasts were anything to go by.

Br Anthony recalled one

breakfast at the Strand Hotel at which Minister Noonan "gave a great speech".

"He spoke about culture and he pointed out that culture is not something you have to travel the world for or bring from far away. Like the word of God, it dwells within you. He mentioned particularly the importance of local culture. So from that, some of us took him at his word. He stood by his word and we have recovered

the tremendous maritime and boating tradition of Limerick city with a huge multiplier effect, which has gone on to be a key to the wonderful resources of Limerick city, the river, the sea

and the wonderful hinterland. These have all been realised and engaged with through the famous gandelows, which are out bobbing on the water as we speak, and now through this new fleet of sailing ships," said Br Anthony.

The boats, Br Anthony said, had already been part of a regatta on the Shannon and had proven their mettle. He was confident they would handle the waters of the Estuary and, further out, the sheltered coastal waters.

Even those with no interest in sailing are encouraged to visit the exhibition in St Mary's.

While built to a unique design to sail in Limerick and along the Shannon Estuary, the CityOne project will not just tickle the fancy of those interested in boatbuilding and naval

architecture.

They are also eye-catchingly beautiful, with the sail of each vessel a canvas in more ways than one.

AK Ilen had arranged an international graphic design competition for the livery and sails, which attracted 62 entries in total with the winners coming from Texas, Mombasa, Portugal and Limerick in the shape of Con Ryan.

Mr MacMahon noted that CityOne was also one of the legacy projects of Limerick City of Culture.

"That means it will continue. These boats will travel to other cities. They have been invited to Dublin and to Galway and that is the whole concept of CityOne - to unite cities through sailing," he said.

James finds his way to the stage through the work of Shakespeare



James De Vita performing In Acting Shakespeare, a 'funny, touching and uplifting story of one man's discovery of acting and language'

ALAN OWENS

CLASSICAL actor James De Vita might have been born to be on stage, but he came to it from an unlikely background.

A fisherman by day, attending community college by night, the native of Long Island believed that honing the craft and understanding the prose written by the likes of William Shakespeare required higher learning to be deciphered.

Then, on a chance visit to a theatre in New York, he saw Sir Ian McKellen perform his one man show *In Acting Shakespeare* and his life was irrevocably changed.

"My career was inspired by watching Mr McKellen," says the star of the one man show *In Acting Shakespeare*, coming to the Lime Tree next week.

"I was just a kid 25 years ago and they took us on a class trip to see the show. That moment of seeing and hearing Shakespeare and poetry for the first time and to this day I don't know why, but it just fascinated me and it changed my life."

This moment and his life before and after is

documented in De Vita's one man tour de force, which is liberally interspersed and accentuated with some of Shakespeare's own works, both famous and obscure, plus a parallel story about the young playwright finding his way in the world.

"The structure is based on the way that Ian McKellen did his show, because I wrote to him for permission," he explains.

"At first I thought I would use much of his show and re-adapt it for myself and that proved not to be a very good theatrical event.

"I picked pieces of my own that spoke to my life at that point, so it could be more accessible that way," he explains.

De Vita warns that the show is funny and not "a teaching show or a dry, treatise on Shakespearean acting".

"I made a lot of mistakes so a lot of it is quite funny, it is not an evening of serious Shakespearean study. I made a mess of things for a long time and I can laugh about it now."

In Acting Shakespeare is in the Lime Tree on October 8 and 9. See www.limetreetheatre.ie