

Text of the Introductory Address delivered by **PROFESSOR PATRICK LONERGAN**, National University of Ireland, Galway on 14 June, 2013 on the occasion of the Conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature *honoris causa*, on **ENDA WALSH**.

A Uachtaráin, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle.....

In Enda Walsh's 2006 masterpiece *The Walworth Farce*, there's a moment of extraordinary beauty, when a young man called Sean recalls a game that his brother Blake used to play. "Blake's full of talk about being an astronaut. He's read a book on it and knows some big words to do with space," says Sean. "He says he'd feel safe up there. He said if he got nervous he'd hide the Earth behind his thumb."

These words encapsulate brilliantly the value and importance of Enda Walsh's writing. His characters exist on the edges of society – and often on the edges of sanity too. When faced with the vastness of the world – with the multitude of responsibilities and choices that we all encounter – his characters often react with fear, and they frequently become isolated. And so they choose to hide the earth behind their thumbs, using tiny spaces like bedrooms, warehouses and drained-out swimming pools as performance spaces, in which they try to create new worlds for themselves.

Enda Walsh's plays are therefore intense investigations of the theatrical and its place in everyday life. They also explore language and meaning, showing how words can imprison us, and can hide the truth rather than expressing it. But most valuably, his plays remind us that love can survive in impossible situations: Blake and Sean in *The Walworth Farce* are living through a terrible trauma, but their love for each other lives on in tiny details like Sean's childhood memory of his brother.

Enda Walsh is an award-winning playwright, director and screenwriter. Originally from Dublin, he now lives in London – and also has strong links with Cork City, where many of his plays are set, and, in more recent years, with Galway, where many of his plays have premiered. He first

came to international attention in 1995 when his play *Disco Pigs* premiered. In addition to making stars of its two leads Eileen Walsh and Cillian Murphy, the play also led the way in bringing Irish drama to new international audiences, especially in Europe.

That play was soon followed by other important works, including *bedbound*, which appeared at the Dublin Theatre Festival in 2000; *The Small Things*, which premiered in London in 2005; and *Chatroom*, a hugely popular play for young actors that first appeared at the Royal National Theatre in London. More recently he has been strongly associated with Druid Theatre, which gave the English-language premieres of *The Walworth Farce*, *the New Electric Ballroom*, and *Penelope* – all of which toured internationally. In 2011, his revised play *Misterman* opened at the Galway Arts Festival before touring to London.

Last year, Enda Walsh became only the third ever Irish writer to win a Tony Award, which was given to him for the book of *Once – the Musical*. That production is still thriving on in Broadway, has recently opened in London's West End, and will soon embark upon a major American tour.

His success extends into screen-writing, notably for his co-written screenplay of *Hunger*, Steve McQueen's unforgettable film about Bobby Sands and the Northern Irish Hunger Strikes.

Evident from this outline of his career is the fact that Enda Walsh's work is unusually international in focus. Many of his plays have premiered not in Ireland but in Germany, and his work is regularly translated into other languages.

The plays themselves are defiantly outward-looking. For example, his 2011 play *Penelope* can be seen as a brilliant and timely satire about the collapse of the Celtic Tiger – but it also takes on, and responds to, the great European story of Homer's *Odyssey*. His work can certainly be seen in the Irish tradition of Brian Friel and Tom Murphy, but it also resonates more widely, taking in everything from Dostoyevsky to Doris Day. It is for this reason that he is the first

Irish playwright since Samuel Beckett who can define for himself the terms against which his work must be judged.

In its entirety, Enda Walsh's work shows how we are all "stamped by our stories", as one of his characters puts it. He reveals how we can be confined by other people's narratives – by the roles imposed upon us by our nations, by our parents, by our God, and, most damagingly, by ourselves. Yet he also shows that performance helps us to understand who we are: Enda Walsh's theatre is a place for play, but it is also the place in which we are most fully human, the place in which we find reasons to continue living, and reasons to continue loving.

For these and many other reasons, it is a great privilege to introduce Enda Walsh as the recipient of an honorary doctorate from this university.

PRAEHONORABILIS PRAESES, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis hunc meum filium, quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in Litteris, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.