

OLLSCOIL NA hÉIREANN, GAILLIMH
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND, GALWAY

Text of the Introductory Address delivered by **PROFESSOR PATRICK LONERGAN**, National University of Ireland, Galway on 10 June, 2016 on the occasion of the Conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Arts *honoris causa*, on **MARIE MULLEN**.

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

On 16 July 2005, Galway experienced a theatrical event like nothing it had ever seen before. At 1 o'clock that afternoon, Marie Mullen took the stage to play the character of Maurya in John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. Ten hour later, she left the stage, having played Labharcam in Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. In between she had appeared in three other plays. When she took her bow, the audience's cheer was so loud that it felt as though the foundations of the Town Hall Theatre were trembling.

There have been many such moments of triumph in Marie Mullen's career. But that event encapsulated something about why she has

become Ireland's most admired and acclaimed actor. The production was called *DruidSynge*, a staging of all six of the plays of John Millington Synge, by the company that Marie founded in 1975 with her fellow Galway graduates Mick Lally and Garry Hynes. Synge had been with Druid from the beginning, his *Playboy of the Western World* appearing in their first season here in Galway, and being regularly revived in the years that followed.

Marie's performances in *DruidSynge* were thus the culmination of many years' work. In the opening play, we watched as she gave us a portrait of a woman whose sons had been stolen from her by the sea: abandoned by God, bereft and impoverished, Maurya is one of the great tragic figures in world theatre. Marie's delivery of her last line – 'no man can be living forever and we must be satisfied' – was greeted with a perfect silence, displaying her ability to allow her audience to experience theatre with the solemnity and transcendence of a deeply felt ritual.

Yet in less than an hour, Marie had us howling with laughter, in a play called *The Tinker's Wedding*. Playing the worst mother-in-law in Irish theatrical history, she created a character who was as brazen as she was blasphemous: a woman who ties her local priest in a sack before telling him that "it's little need we ever had of the like of you to get us our

bit to eat, and our bit to drink, and our time of love when we were young men and women, and were fine to look at.'

She then played a blind beggar in the *Well of the Saints*, a play that sets out to reveal what Synge called the "sex horrors" of rural Irish life – and she also played the Widow Quinn in *Playboy of the Western World*, revealing that character to us as Synge originally imagined her: powerful and assertive, cynical but compassionate, intelligent and fully alive: the kind of woman, that is, who might just provoke a riot.

It is the sign of a great actor that they are always the same, yet always different. This has been true of Marie throughout her career, not just with *Druid* but also with the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Abbey, and elsewhere. To watch *Druid* was to understand that no-one else but Marie Mullen could have played these five roles. Yet from one character to the next, she embodied people who were utterly different from each other; indeed she allowed for the creation of distinctive atmospheres that shifted us through the entire spectrum of our emotions: from the tragic resilience of *Riders to the Sea* to the raucousness of *Tinker's Wedding* to the wistfulness of *Playboy* and beyond

That emotional and technical range has been abundantly evident in her other roles, including the premieres of Tom Murphy's *Bailegangaire*, *Conversations on a Homecoming*, and *The Last Days of a Reluctant Tyrant*. For these and other productions, she has won countless awards, including a lifetime achievement award at the Irish Times Theatre Awards in 2012. For Martin McDonagh's debut play *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* she won a Tony Award for creating the role of Maureen, the daughter of the worst mother in Irish theatrical Irish history. To celebrate the twentieth anniversary of that premiere, she will soon take on the role of the mother in a revival of McDonagh's play, which will premiere in Galway before touring internationally.

We here at NUI Galway are about to graduate our first ever class of students with a BA in Drama, and we are about to open a brand new theatre complex. It means so much to us to be able to point to Marie Mullen as an example what can be achieved from humble beginnings here in this university. As is true of her two co-founders of Druid, Marie has ensured that her company's work is firmly rooted in the west of Ireland; she herself is a native of Sligo and of course is strongly associated with Galway – and indeed with Dublin too, where she now lives with her husband Seán and her two daughters.

It will also be unsurprising to anyone familiar with Druid's work to learn that Marie was a student of archaeology here at NUI Galway. Druid's work *is* archaeological – and this is evident not only in Garry Hynes's direction but also in Marie's performances. Her acting has always sought to return us to our origins, to venture below the surface, to dig into our landscape in order to retrieve things that had been lost and hidden. Marie Mullen's work has given us the opportunity not only to find ourselves but also to understand ourselves – and this too is one of the signs of a great artist.

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis hanc meam filiam, quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, *honoris causa*, ad gradum Doctoratus in Artibus, idque tibe fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.