

DONMAR®

THE NIGHT ALIVE

By **Conor McPherson**

behind^{the}
scenes

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Introduction

Welcome to this Behind the Scenes guide to Conor McPherson's exciting new play *THE NIGHT ALIVE* at the Donmar Warehouse. In the following pages, you will find a wealth of information designed to give you a closer look at the process of bringing this production from page to stage.

Following the success of the Donmar's recent revival of *THE WEIR*, perhaps Conor McPherson's best known play, we are excited to be presenting the world premiere of *THE NIGHT ALIVE*, directed by the playwright and featuring an exciting cast of actors, many of whom have worked with Conor in the past.

This guide aims to set the play and the production in context through conversations with members of the cast and creative team, as well as offering an insight to this new production and a discussion on why the Donmar space is so well suited to the work of this playwright in particular.

The guide includes an interview with sound designer Gregory Clarke, who has created a detailed soundscape for the production, as well as a conversation with actor Jim Norton, who plays Maurice and has regularly performed in Conor's plays in the past. There are also extracts from the rehearsal diary of Oonagh Murphy, the Donmar's Resident Assistant Director, as well as practical exercises designed to further unlock the world of the play.

Finally, we have also included a conversation with Morag Pirrie and Sharon Pearson, who together make up the Donmar's Wardrobe department, and who play a vital role in ensuring that the costumes for every production are carefully sourced and maintained.

We hope that you find this guide interesting and informative. To view the Behind the Scenes guides for other productions, please visit www.donmarwarehouse.com/discover/resources.

Simon Evans

Sam Maynard

*Ciarán Hinds and
Caoilfhionn Dunne*





Section 1:

Background to **THE NIGHT ALIVE**

THE NIGHT ALIVE: An Introduction

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"The Beatles apparently – whenever they were about to record a new song – they had this in joke where someone would go 'I think this could be the big one!'"

Conor McPherson, 2009

It's been just over three years since we've had a "new play" in the Donmar's Earlham Street theatre; we've had new airings of forgotten plays, new revivals of modern classics and new translations of classic classics, but Conor McPherson's THE NIGHT ALIVE is the first time since Mark Haddon's POLAR BEARS in 2010 that our first night audience can say that they're the first people to see and hear a brand new play. And what a play it is.

There's that black, kind of cold tiredness you get just from being worn out by being really scared for days on end, where you just want something bad to happen – just to get it over with.

Kenneth

It's always a challenge to provide an introduction to a new piece of writing: there's the need to try and offer some background to it and explain some of the things in touches on, but there's also a desire to keep some of the surprises back – so that when you sit down to watch or read it, it's as thrilling an experience as it is for that lucky first night crowd.



Brian Gleeson



Ciarán Hinds

So, where to start? Maybe with Conor McPherson himself.

He was born in Dublin and educated at University College, where he began writing his first plays as a member of the drama society. He won the George Devine Award in 1997 with *ST NICHOLAS*, and went on to win an Olivier Award for Best New Play in 1999 with his follow-up, *THE WEIR* (recently revived here at the Donmar). Since then, his plays (including *THE SEAFARER*, *SHINING CITY*, *THE VEIL*, and *PORT AUTHORITY*) have received Olivier and Tony Award nominations, while he also works as a sometime screenwriter and director. In 2004 the Telegraph newspaper named him 'the finest dramatist of his generation' while, over in America, the New York Times agreed, naming him 'the finest playwright of his generation' in 2007.

"You have a beautiful idea in your head and you think this could be the one, and I think 'If I don't put some of my soul into this then it's nothing, but if there is some spark of how I feel about being totally alive in there, then I've done it.'"

Conor McPherson

Now, sitting in the Donmar in 2013, we have before us (to borrow from the opening stage directions): 'a bedsit in an Edwardian house near the Phoenix Park in Dublin: cluttered and messy, boxes of knick-knacks piled into corners, a framed poster of Marvin Gaye's album cover asking "What's Goin' On?". In front of our eyes an elderly gentleman stands in the room looking out at the garden as moonlight pours in through balcony doors. He is still for a moment, until he hears voices approaching, and hurries quietly off upstairs.

This sequence marks the beginning of an extraordinary play which features all those wonderful things we've come to expect from Conor's work: troubled lives, lost souls and disappointment (as Conor himself said "I am writing about the predicament of being alive") but also hilarity, redemption and even (rarer in his work) a tangible and uplifting sense of hope.

Here I got you a present... A book for 1.99. We can share it. How to Survive Life Threatening Situations.

The elderly gentleman described above is Maurice, who owns the Edwardian house in question and leases one of the rooms, as a bed sit, to Tommy (in his fifties, well built but well worn). Separated from his wife, alienated from his children, out of work and out of money, Tommy lives in squalor surrounded by take-away containers and dirty work clothes, reusing the same coin in the electric meter over and over again. His friend and (self-titled) business partner, Doc drops by from time to time (bursting in uninvited through the balcony windows) to discuss work opportunities ("Clearing out somebody's shed... Transport... Delivery") and enquire after money Tommy owes him. Doc is a little slow in his thoughts ("I get there in the end. Just... about fifteen minutes after everybody else") and depends on Tommy to help him get through the day-to-day struggle of their lives. There is a sense too that this has been the extent of their lives for the past two years, scraping by on the occasional shared fish and chips or banana sandwich, flogging cigars in pubs and stealing potatoes from Maurice's garden. Unfulfilled lives. Disappointing, small lives.

All I'm asking – what happened to all that sweetness... is what I want to know... When we used to go down the canal, and you holding my hand, and asking me all the questions in the world. And now the country is a shambles and we're crying out.

Maurice

All this changes however, when Tommy rushes to the aid of a girl, Aimee, when she's attacked in the streets of Dublin. He brings her back to the bedsit (anxiously ensuring that Maurice remains unaware of her presence), takes care of her ("Do you want to stay here?", "Do you want a cup of tea?", "Do you like Westerns?") and a relationship develops between them which threatens the strange make-shift family unit of Maurice, Tommy and Doc. The appearance of her violent ex-boyfriend Kenneth unbalances their world even further, but in the aftermath of his visit they are all able to consider the thrilling potential of another chance at life

You only get a few goes, Tommy. At life. You don't get endless goes. Two three goes maybe. When you hit the right groove you'll click right in there. No drama.

Maurice

Conor talks of writing as a sort of exorcism of what's been occupying him for a while (he claims all three of the principal characters in his earlier play, THE SEAFARER, are based on him). "You have to write about your own experience," he says, "if you haven't felt it, the audience aren't going to feel it." Writing, he says, gives him a way of exploring how people exist with the things that have happened to them, so as Tommy, Maurice and Doc move through the play, examining what kind of a life they lead, we hear, in their words, Conor's own voice asking the audience who, why and what we are, and whether we understand how glorious but also how difficult it is to be totally alive.

Well maybe my problem is it's like my eyes have been taken out and I just can't see what's in front of me like it's always night time so when night time really comes you think it feels like a relief except I can't sleep so that when it's morning it feels like it's burning my brain... 'cause you're going around everywhere with a clouded mind trying to forget a devil lives inside you

Kenneth

And do we, as an audience, share this understanding with the characters? Do we understand what they're going through? Conor hopes so: "Why would people want to watch a character if they weren't somehow them as well?" he asks. Conor's writing (in this and all of his plays) seems to invite us to lean forward and listen while the characters show us a picture of our own lives; our experiences might not extend to the specificity of the domestic violence, squalid poverty or mental issues shown in the play, but we all understand those universal things that fill the lives of Tommy, Doc, Maurice, Aimee and Kenneth: love, death, confusion, disappointment and hope.

Death is real, Tommy! You're just knocking the days off the calendar. Just another invisible man, knowing that the end is sneaking in on you and knowing it's gonna be the worst part of your life.

Maurice

Maybe the characters are experiencing the very worst of these things, living a life where everything is so heightened, but Conor seems to urge us to admit that we struggle with the same things as them and have to make the same sort of peace. The audience doesn't need to be as unhappy or broken as Tommy or Aimee or Doc, we can still all commune in the theatre and share a very specific feeling at one time or another.

"The feeling is 'I can't live here'"

Conor McPherson

The very best theatre offers, and has for thousands of years, a liberating catharsis, and Conor's work is amongst the very best theatre. Watching the play in the rehearsal room you start to appreciate it, as Conor hoped, as "a little release valve". Take a look at the poster for THE NIGHT ALIVE: a man standing with his arms slightly open in the snow or rain. That's the effect of this stunning new play. You can lean forward, listen closely, go through that experience with the characters, and come out drained but also somehow renewed and refreshed.

When you consider this fact: that we are all just going round a place where there is no time, how can any man say there is no God?

Doc

Brian Gleeson and
Michael McElhatton





Epic Intimacy – Conor McPherson at The Donmar Warehouse

Irish theatre has recently been produced in great abundance in London. We've been treated to major productions of *THE BEAUTY QUEEN OF LEENANE* (Young Vic) by Martin McDonagh, *MOLLY SWEENEY* (Print Room) by Brian Friel, and *MISTERMAN* (National Theatre) by Enda Walsh. The Michael Grandage Company is about to open McDonagh's *THE CRIPPLE OF INISHMAAN*, while Enda Walsh's stage version of *ONCE* is still bringing in huge crowds in the West End.

Arguably the flagship theatre of this Irish theatrical revolution is our own Donmar Warehouse, where a recent production of Brian Friel's *PHILADELPHIA, HERE I COME* has been joined by a catalogue of exceptional plays by Conor McPherson. Two of his plays bookended 2012 as part of the Donmar Trafalgar Season: *DUBLIN CAROL* at the beginning of the year and his new adaptation of Strindberg's *DANCE OF DEATH* at the end. Josie Rourke's revival of *THE WEIR* has just finished its wonderfully received run and Conor's new play *THE NIGHT ALIVE* is waiting to fill the empty space.

I was curious to discuss what made the Donmar such a good fit for Conor's work, and was lucky enough to sit down with two previous Donmar Resident Assistant Directors: Abbey Wright and Titas Halder, who had directed the wonderful productions of *DUBLIN CAROL* and *DANCE OF DEATH* respectively.

How did you first come across Conor McPherson's work?

ABBAY WRIGHT: I first read Conor's work when I was, ironically, in Scotland working on *BE NEAR ME* for the Donmar. The first of his plays that I read was *THIS LIME TREE BOWER* – I just came across it in a book shop and read it then and there in one go, just sitting in the bookshop.

It's hard to describe what actually connects you to a writer but it grabbed me. It just grabbed me and I felt like he was trying to communicate something about life that I felt was essential in some way. He was trying to communicate something that I understood. Something that I felt very much. It made me feel a lot and that's what I tend to look for in plays.

TITAS HALDER: I remember reading them. He's a writer in his early forties, so all of those early plays that he wrote in his twenties which were premiered at the Royal Court and the Bush were written in early/mid 1990s. They were all incredibly successful when they were done but I was too young to see them. I missed that original production of *THE WEIR* and a lot of those other plays. They've now entered theatrical history, they're undeniably "Modern Classics", but I'm part of the generation that missed them first time around. So I first encountered them on the page.

So what was it that made him your choice to create a new version of *DANCE OF DEATH*?

TH: Well I'd read the Strindberg play in a very good translation and everything about that play that captured me also struck me whenever I saw or read one of Conor's plays. The original play is so tightly woven, so meticulously constructed, that I knew I needed someone who had a real mastery of the craft of playwriting, but the play is also about people's relationships at their deepest and darkest. In a way it's about people stealing the life force from each other (Strindberg's suggested the title of *THE VAMPIRES* to his German translator) so I knew I needed someone who had an understanding of the predicament of life, that desperate part of human existence, someone with the depth of life experience. It was as simple as combing all those elements and realising that the number one choice was clearly Conor McPherson.



Jim Norton

Abbey, what made you choose to direct DUBLIN CAROL?

AW: I knew I wanted to direct one of Conor's plays and I really wanted it to be DUBLIN CAROL because I think that he writes about history and roots, and the damage they can cause, so beautifully. I think John [Plunkett, the principal character in DUBLIN CAROL – a middle-aged Dubliner who, on Christmas Eve, finds himself plagued by the past] is essentially broken. He's been battered and beaten: most likely physically by his own family when he was a child and, more metaphorically, by his own past. He's trying to connect with people but he's become such a product of a broken past that he doesn't quite know how to begin to do that. Conor explores this so wonderfully; how people exist with the things that have happened with them and the things that they are carrying; how they exist in their present day.

Do you think that's a very Irish approach to character? Is Conor an archetypal "Irish Writer"?

AW: Actually I don't think it is a specifically Irish approach. He's more Chekhovian. Think about Finbar in THE WEIR; there's something of Chekhov's Loparkin (from *The Cherry Orchard*) in him and in the way he is with the other characters. I'd even go as far as saying he's very universal as a writer; it's one of the things that make him so brilliant. Yes, it's "DUBLIN" CAROL and yes, part of what people latch onto is that he's writing in perfect Irish vernacular so you can be in that room with those people and know who they are; you're included, you understand their language and have access to their jokes and their banter. But that's not what his plays are actually about I don't think. They're about how impossible it is to be alive and those things that everyone feels no matter where they are or when they are. That's why I think he's a genius.

Is there something “eternal” about his writing then, rather than “current”?

TH: I can see what you mean. You mean there’s something permanent rather than a fixation on what’s right here right now? I agree, though perhaps the word I would chose is “Epic”. There’s always something epic in great work; the characters are always trying to save their souls on some level. But there’s intimacy too, and the marriage, between epic and intimate, is particularly rare. Anyone can write a play and set it in a nameless place and hope that that vagueness will give it various options for its own life, but for someone to be doing the epic and the domestic at the same time is rather wonderful.

He’s undeniably poetical, but it’s very tied up in the world of the play and the language; if you say “plainness” it’s not that it’s “unadorned” and if you say its “poetical” it’s not to say it’s forced to be that way; there’s a purity and honesty. When people express themselves honestly then the intimacy with an audience follows. If you capture that then what you get in terms of dialogue and structure is that perfect marriage between plainness and poetry, the combination of the intimate and the epic.

Do you think that’s why he’s been so well produced and received at the Donmar? Is there something about that theatre which really serves that epic intimacy?

AW: Yes, and it’s funny because that phrase “epic intimacy” is so often used to describe theatres. It’s massively overused these days, but it is so applicable to the Donmar. Think of the height, the proximity to the audience. I can remember when Conor said to me that THE WEIR might happen at the Donmar and I thought how extraordinary that would be. There’s something about that space and hearing words and stories in that space; a magical equation which is always going to support Conor’s work.

I remember Conor saying to me that he could remember sitting with his old Grandfather by a fire, staring into the flames and listening to the very slow rhythms and patterns of speech as his Grandfather told him stories and being utterly hypnotised by the spell of it. There is something of the magic, of the mystery about his writing and about the Donmar. Words sit in that space in a beautiful way and cast a spell through which the audience somehow communes. It’s like a candle in the dark. The audience are cradling the story. It’s the perfect space for it.

TH: But, space aside, there’s also something about the Donmar as a producer of the very best plays. I mean Conor’s quite simply the best around. A few years ago I would have unequivocally been able to say that “Harold Pinter is the greatest living playwright” and now there are phenomenal writers like Caryl Churchill and Edward Bond but they’re all much further along in their careers, but you look at McPherson and he’s only now coming into what might end up being his Golden Age!

So the match is that the Donmar prides itself on bringing the best theatre makers together?

AW: Absolutely. The Donmar’s policy has always been to find the best storytellers. Conor himself said “It’s interesting to sit with people who are good storytellers and just let them go” and that’s what the Donmar and writers like Conor can offer when they collaborate. There’s something about the Donmar; trusting in its writers and its audience, finding the best storytellers and dealing in universal themes.

TH: That’s so true. The size and shape of the Donmar really allows the relationship between play and audience to resonate and Conor has always made the work that he wants to make for an audience. That’s the great thing to take away. He’s always stayed true and written honestly and found that that chimes with an audience.

Section 2:

The Donmar's Production



Caoilfhionn Dunne

Cast and Creative Team

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Cast (in order of speaking)



Tommy
CIARÁN HINDS



Aimee
CAOILFHIONN DUNNE



Doc
MICHAEL MCELHATTON



Maurice
JIM NORTON



Kenneth
BRIAN GLEESON

Production

Director	CONOR MCPHERSON
Designer	SOUTRA GILMOUR
Lighting Designer	NEIL AUSTIN
Sound Designer	GREGORY CLARKE
Casting Director	ALASTAIR COOMER CDG

Rehearsal Diary

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Resident Assistant Director Oonagh Murphy's Rehearsal Diary



First read-throughs of plays are often memorable, unquantifiable events. On a hazy bank holiday morning in Dublin, we had the pleasure of hearing **THE NIGHT ALIVE** for the first time. Perhaps it was that many of the actors were long-time collaborators of Conor McPherson, perhaps it was that we were reading it in his hometown, a place he often writes about but where his work is rarely produced, perhaps it was that he had made changes to the play text within the previous week so the actors were reading this particular draft for the first time; for whatever reason, there was a kinetic energy in the room that generated great optimism for the coming months and the premiere of the play in the Donmar Warehouse.

After the read-through, the designer, Soutra Gilmore, presented the company with the model box. It is an ambitious design which situates the bedsit where the action of the play takes place within the dimensions of the Donmar. The bedsit is in a room of an Edwardian house, and the design references the architectural features of such a building, by placing the room on a diagonal axis, incorporating the stage-left vom in order to create a large room. Soutra explains that tilting the playing space in this way will allow for two entrances, a consistent concern for designers in this theatre. The details of the space – influenced by the fact that the occupant is a messy hoarder – are laid out in a provisional configuration to be honed and simplified in rehearsal. The clutter at a low level is off-set by the height of the space which scales up, taking in the two

Conor directs with an encouraging openness - all suggestions are taken on board and explored.

floors of the theatre. Windows and doors are slightly exaggerated in their proportions. It is a combination of uncanny hyper-naturalism and things being slightly larger than life that create the right atmosphere for the play – an unremarkable space where something is about to happen.

Conor's conversations with the actors have been well underway before today, the beginning of rehearsals proper. We start to hear about some of the work they have done on their characters, as discussion turns to costume. Soutra and Anna, the costume supervisor, speak to each actor one by one.

"What do you think they might wear?" – a broad question quickly evolves to the specific. Conor and the actors operate by constantly sifting for possibility. Talking about a character we might imagine to wear workman's boots, someone suddenly says "Maybe he wears really light plimsolls". A pivot to the strange, the unexpected; this way of working emerges as a common theme.

On the second day, the actors begin to work on their feet. Conor directs with an encouraging openness – all suggestions are taken on board and explored. As the writer of the play, it would be easy for him to become the sole authority of the work, but he resists this, often answering the actors' requests for explanation or affirmation with "I don't know". The play is still forming. He makes changes to text for logic and style, almost as though he is hearing it for the first time as the actors work with it.

We move through the play quickly this first week. There is little discussion. Instead we work to find possible iterations of the blocking, how it might work. There is something writerly about doing it this way, with an eye to the longer process. The first draft is merely that, the "getting something down on the page" (or stage, as it were). The next stage will be about editing, selecting, refining and cleaning.

We end the week on the scene that is most difficult, in terms of staging and story. It is highly dramatic and technically detailed. After Conor has ended rehearsals proper, the actors do not rush off. They sit and discuss the week's work, tired but engaged. In response to whether he is satisfied with the week's work, Conor says: "I'm just trying to figure out if we have a play or not". I'm quite sure we do, but I'm very happy to stick around while he finds out.

WEEK TWO

Rehearsing something as absurd as *The Night Alive* might resemble rehearsals for a panto at times but the way that Conor works means that any sort of descent into giggles will be swiftly followed by a moment of sobering gravity. This is a world where something is always slightly off, but where there is also always a slight chance that everything is not as bad as it seems.

What begins to emerge in our second week of rehearsals is how the physical dramaturgy of the production performs a key function in support of the text. The cluttered set offers the director and actors the opportunity to build organically a visual story where objects have a trajectory. Food for example might be referred to in the dialogue and features as a signifier of relationship or history. A hammer is at one moment an innocuous tool used daily to jimmy the electricity meter, but ten minutes later is used in a far more loaded way. The physical detail of the space is built up and tracked, like a sixth character.

One of the brilliant modes that Conor encourages in developing blocking is to find a physical activity that undercuts or offsets the dialogue. A sincere interaction might be accompanied by a character eating a bizarre food stuff or going to the toilet. This adds to the sense of naturalism, watching the reality of characters living in this space. Moreover, it challenges the characters' more esoteric moments, so that what might be considered the play's philosophies are constantly undercut and called into question. It is this sense of things being off-kilter, messy and of people unconsciously sabotaging their ability to just be with one another, that is the terrain of the work.

We work back through the text taking a session on each scene or subscene. What has been set as a draft of action is played again, with suggestions as to how things might be developed. What is noticeable here is that the company doesn't always work linearly, delving further into one idea, cementing one way that the moment is played. Instead, an actor might do something that Conor will pick up on mid-scene, and encourage, resulting in an entirely different outcome. When necessary, text is changed to support new ideas. What is important is character and atmosphere and this is a company that is very articulate in how both are used to adjust the stakes throughout to 'keep ahead of the audience'.

An example of this is when we are working on one of the violent scenes in the play. The text between the two characters suggests affability, at points even, a growing familiarity. Yet, the end point of the scene is violence, a very real attack played out with cool and viscous intent. The actors work with Conor to plot through each moment working out how to stage the unsettling sequence. He offers them two or three simple notes which reconfigure the initial draft of blocking we worked out last week. Through sharp changes, the physical score of the piece is developed to allow tension to reach a peak and diffuse again in a way

that is very disorientating to watch. The violence when it does come is both anti-climatic and shocking, a heady and charging combination.

The second appearance of violence is a messy, tawdry domestic fisticuffs that gets out of hand. Paul, the fight director, works with us to choreograph very precisely how this action will play out. The actors work through the sequence with a view to character but also to image and atmosphere. Conor makes suggestions that allow them to have a very clear throughline of intention through a seemingly frenetic scene. Simultaneously, he builds clusters of action that are shifting our eyeline constantly. This creates layers of attention which again disorientate, so that the final action of violence appears to come out of nowhere. This is important in the Donmar space, where the three sides and two tiers, make stage violence incredibly difficult to achieve. The action spins us around and walks us into a corner, before turning us back around to show us what was happening while we were looking elsewhere.

By the end of the week we have worked back through two thirds of the play. We end the week's work looking at a scene which brings some comic relief to the darker, foreboding parts of the text. The company work constantly to find the next gag, the next way to make one another and us laugh. It strikes me that the atmosphere of suggestion that Conor creates is as much to do with keeping the company engaged and discovering as it is about wrapping up a really nice present for the audience. Through hours of focussing on the grim reality of these characters, twenty minutes of lightness, of mirth, or of sincerity, suddenly seems like an event. It is this process of finding out that stays with us as we head home for the weekend.

WEEK THREE

We continuously understand more about how this play is going to work in the Donmar. Week Three is largely about how the space is inhabited by the characters of *The Night Alive*.

Pertinent to our work is giving attention to sections of the narrative that require detailed visual plotting. The actors work instinctively proposing possible ways that the fight scene might be staged. This first stage is important – that the action is impulsive, illogical, that we see how the characters interact naturally. Conor encourages that the actors resist the urge to do the obvious. Paul then works on the draft of action to figure out various opportunities for simplifying/complicating, streamlining and tightening. He and Conor work together to compose a score of the messy fight that is psychologically truthful but visually arresting. He gives the actors specific targets to hit each time so that the routine becomes ingrained and second nature. The actors will run the sequence in a fight call before the show every night to ensure it stays safe and tight.

We approach our work on the play's most celebratory scene in a similar mode. A dance between the characters Aimee, Tommy and Doc is plotted in the text at a point when all is going well for the characters. It suggests a physical closeness, a sense of hope for this unusual family unit. Conor sets up the conditions for the actors to explore what happens – business and music are combined to figure out how the dance evolves.



Caoilfhionn Dunne

When we have experimented with different ideas, Conor begins to shape and edit. He highlights the particular points in the music he'd like certain beats of action to happen. As the actors continue to figure out what the dance is, and how they interact with one another through it, the moment becomes about telling the story through the bodies in the space.

Around all this physical practice, the production crew are continuing to develop the rehearsal set to suit where the work is going. Similar to *The Weir* set, a lot of detail is important to render the atmosphere of the play's place and time. Rehearsal notes are compiled each day which document the way in which the design is to respond to the evolving play. The stage management team source props and food that will connote these particular lives in Dublin in 2013. These are incorporated into day to day rehearsals, and generally throw up some new ideas for how moments are played.

Towards the end of the week our attention begins to turn to the next stage of the work. Having run the second half of the play in week two, we are excited to be able to run the first half on the third Friday. Running in this way, as rough and technical as it is, allows the actors and us to gauge where the work is at. The rhythms of the play begin to emerge. The actors, particularly Ciarán (playing Tommy) who appears in every scene, discuss how the peaks and troughs of action are becoming clearer. We are able to observe his work taking on even greater detail as he plots through the arcs of tension and diffusion in Tommy's story.

We finish the week on a high having concluded a robust first three weeks of work in Dublin. The project has gained momentum and it feels like the perfect time to bring the work to the Donmar, to begin to work with the other creatives and to invite our colleagues in to the room to discover more about this new play with us.

WEEK FOUR

We begin week four by returning to the text. The company sits around the table once again and reads the play. It is an exercise in listening to one another, hearing what the play is at this point, and establishing anything we might be missing as we work it on the floor. Conor continues to make slight edits and script changes. He cuts a unit of comic text and supplies the actors with a new one he believes will work better. It does. We pay close attention to rhythm and stress here and he works closely with the actors to engage them in hitting certain lines in a particular way. This very specific works helps to point up beats and units of narrative plotting, making clear what the physical map of the play needs to do to support that.

Our second day rehearsing in London there is a meet and greet with the Donmar company. This is an opportunity for the cast to be introduced to the people who will be working with them to bring THE NIGHT ALIVE through its last

few weeks of rehearsal, technical stages, publicity and press night.

At a production meeting the following day this great sense of this support is again manifested in a large gathering and thorough

discussions about all of technical aspects. Conor, stage management and I walk through the set with Soutra (designer), Diane (production manager), Chris and Jonathan (props supervisors) and Dave (master carpenter). We discuss how the actors have adapted the design in their playing. The bathroom for example has evolved in its uses and so the conversation now turns to what is needed in there, how much we should see and how practical it really needs to be. A basin and some shelves are added and the toilet's general position is marked in. Similar discussions happen about the location of lights and light switches. We point out any positional changes we have made in the mark up of the room although as we are still negotiating the play's physical shape, these continue to remain conditional. The walk-around proves invaluable in terms of making sure all of the information that has been itemised in the daily rehearsal notes is now part of the production schedule for the tight get-in and technical period.

By the end of the week are in a position to do our first run-through. This means we will put together and play through the various units we have worked on separately. It is a daunting task at the end of a week but the actors rise valiantly to it. One of the aims of seeing a run like this is to understand what sort of playing impulses are needed to sustain rhythm and tension throughout. We realise things about how certain scenes work, particularly about tone and what we are asking the audience to invest in early on in the play. We discover that certain moments require less, and that we need to help the audience in terms of where we are focussing at any point. Reassuringly the narrative does emerge, and Conor in his feedback is appreciative of the cast's story-telling abilities.

Ciarán Hinds and Jim Norton



WEEK FIVE

We are at the point in the work where most of the components have found their way to the rehearsal room and the work is about editing, selecting, positioning, playing and contrasting. One of the ways that Conor experiments with tone is the music which he uses in production. There is music at the beginning, end and in all of the scene changes. Music is also used within the narrative action of the play. The use of music here is about creating another layer of detail in our observation of these characters' lives. There is a sense that each track is connected to the lives of Tommy and Doc, as though we might be listening to bands they listen to. There is also an Eastern influence and a jazz influence. Conor tries different ideas during various runs. It strikes me that music is another agent in his creation of the play; it allows access to another layer of meaning, supporting interactions that are word-less. Conor is fluent in this language too. He drafts a plot of what music is used, changing and testing until he is relatively happy with how they are working for the moment. In the theatre, it will be about having a conversation with Gregory, the sound designer, about how (and why) the music is incorporated.

As elements of the set are consolidated and we rehearse full runs with the 'real' objects of the design, the texture of the play world clarifies. It strikes me that this is a kitchen-sink drama where conventions are constantly played with. We are confronted by a very familiar living room, but the details are made strange, they are at odds with our associations with a kitchen. Conor uses this *modus operandi* to charge through the difficult Week Five of rehearsing a new play. His persistence to challenge his own writing by allowing the actors to be the vessels which give life to the characters is fascinating at this point. Mistakes are kept, if someone paraphrases a line and he thinks it sounds more real, more natural, funnier, it is written into the play. Similarly, the actors make suggestions for ways that the action would flow better, focus more sharply, and pace more masterfully, are incorporated.

Conor references Strindberg's idea that drama emerges when characters are playing alternating or contradictory motivations every

other page. This is what being human is, and it is what makes drama like *The Night Alive* feel very real.

As we near the point of moving into the theatre, we run the play each afternoon. In the morning we work notes from the previous day, focussing on detail, finding fresh ways of approaching the text, of keeping it alive. As the rest of the team make practical arrangements, the get-in is underway, and the production crew and designers are preparing for tech, Conor keeps the cast focussed on their personal tracks in the work. We show the play to the Donmar staff and their engagement with the story rejuvenates the process, showing us where the work is sharp and measured. Each run shows us a different side of the play, demonstrating to us that the preview period will present opportunities to render and hone the final result. We pack up the rehearsal room and move across the road looking forward to what the final week will do to this new play.

Michael McElhatton





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in conversation

A conversation with Gregory Clarke, Sound Designer

.....

Gregory Clarke has worked extensively as a Sound Designer at the National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company and in the West End. **THE NIGHT ALIVE** is his fourth design for the Donmar, following **A VOYAGE ROUND MY FATHER**, **THE PHILANTHROPIST** and **THE SILENCE OF THE SEA**.

Can you tell us a little bit about your design for **THE NIGHT ALIVE**?

Well the first thing to say is that it's a naturalistic play and set in a naturalistic environment; in broad terms it's the interactions of a group of people in a Dublin bedsit. Whenever I'm approaching a play of this sort, a play which I would consider "domestic", I tend to want to keep things simple and sparse rather than complex and abstract. That means it should feel like there's not a huge amount going on. I've included some touches here and there outside of the room, to suggest the world outside, but it's not particularly complicated. It's one of those shows where everything the characters do and say has to land absolutely beautifully; the worst thing I could do is hinder that with too many dogs barking in the distance!



Michael McElhatton and
Caoilfhionn Dunne



Caoilfhionn Dunne

Is the show void of “theatrical device” sound then?

Well not entirely. We have some interesting scene changes to execute (which need to convey changes in time as well as a bit of set and prop movement) and Conor said from the first that he wanted them to be covered by music cues.

Did Conor provide those pieces of music?

Yes. I have had that responsibility in the past but on this occasion Conor had his own wonderful ideas about what the music should be. There was nothing actually “locked down” before rehearsals began but we had a fairly good idea of what was going to be needed.

It actually reminded me a lot working with Enda Walsh, who happens to be Irish too though I don’t how relevant that is: with a specific generation of writers with a particular style (like Enda and Conor) they’ve told me there’s often music around them while they’re writing their plays. It’s not that it’s necessarily or consciously written to music, but there is music in their environment and in their heads when they put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard. When it comes to bringing the play from page to stage they’re then able to take everything they’d listened to and absorbed while they were writing the play and they put those pieces of music, which informed the play, into the world of the play. Conor himself told me that he’d come across a song late at night on the radio while he was writing *THE NIGHT ALIVE* that he knew at once fitted the mood of the author and would fit the mood of the production. It just worked.

He knew, therefore, what those musical choices might be and that’s a hugely useful first step for me. I have been able to bring other valuable pieces to the table: things that I knew would be needed in those scenes to help locate the action, land a narrative point or underline a moment of significance (and other little touches here and there) but I’m also tweaking and rounding Conor’s musical choices in sympathy with the general theme and mood of his production.

I know you've not worked with Conor before. How have you approached your first project together?

I generally find that taking things quite gently is important when working with any new creative person on a project. It's important to take the time to ascertain how I can best serve the Director and the production and, once that's been established, we can begin to move forward. In the initial stages I might test the water and see how the Director is going to respond to what I can bring to the table. Do I need to speak up from the start or keep quiet until we're a way into the rehearsal process? Some of the world's best Directors have a great deal of thoughts and ideas to share before kick off while others (of that same renown) like to come to decisions during rehearsals so need me to hang back and see what emerges in those weeks.

The resultant Director/Sound Designer relationship (like every other creative partnership) completely depends on the needs of the production and the personality of the team; it's really horses for courses. Some Directors have a really thorough understanding of sound and are much more fluent in the way they can think about and talk about that element of the production while others don't really think sonically at all. The different personalities of different Directors and their different approaches to a play need to be negotiated so that I can support them and their show.

Here, as well, on *THE NIGHT ALIVE* the Director also happens to be the Author, which offers us great insight into the mood and aesthetic tone of the show; we can make important decisions about music, sound scapes and naturalistic and abstract devices quickly; confident that they're in line with the Author's vision for the world of the play.

You've talked about "abstract" and "naturalistic"; what's the difference as far as you're concerned?

Well the difference, I suppose, between the concrete naturalistic non-abstract and the abstract is that, with the latter, you play with "the recognisable". You move away from the instantly recognisable and play with how far you can push something before it stops being recognisable. This all depends, of course, on if the piece can sustain it and if it is benefitted by it; but, if the piece calls for it, then you can start to take people on a more imaginative journey. It becomes an exercise in imagination for the audience. You have to be so sure it can withstand it though because, if you move into the abstract with a piece that just can't take it (because of the writing, mood, theme or style), then there's a clash of forms and the audience feel like they're not included in it anymore. They don't know which world they're supposed to inhabit and that's not a good thing.

The last show I worked on for the Donmar Warehouse was *THE SILENCE OF THE SEA* [at the Trafalgar Studios at the beginning of 2013] and, while the narrative of the play was, ostensibly and notionally, located in a domestic context, the concept for the show (from the Director and the Designer) was abstract and the visual clues (set, props and lack thereof) conceived by the Designer told us that we weren't looking for a hyper-naturalistic sound design. That told the audience that we were inhabiting a more abstract world and the sound design reflected that; allowing us to play more with an audience's imagination. With *THE NIGHT ALIVE*, on the other hand, Conor's production calls for us to be drawn into the naturalistic and domestic world of these characters. Too much abstraction will prevent the audience from engaging with the story and the people in it.

Following on from that, the specific qualities of the Donmar really do enable audiences to engage with the stories and characters it showcases. This is your third time working at the Donmar; are there any unique things you need to consider in terms of sound?

Well considering its stature in the theatre world, it really is a relatively small and intimate space and that's a double edged sword. The thing about spaces like that is that while it can be really hard to do "epic", it is possible to approach sound design with a delicacy that's not possible

in larger spaces. You can deliver very difficult and delicate soundscapes to an audience in a way you really wouldn't be able to deliver it in a large theatre. It can, in some ways, be a more creative space in which to work. It can allow you to paint a picture with shades of grey and with a much finer brush that you could in a bigger room and this suits Conor's work (and that of the Donmar) down to the ground. It allows the whole creative team to be more creative.

Creativity is an interesting thing to discuss in terms of sound design as there seem to be different titles involved. What's the difference between a Sound Engineer, Designer and Composer?

Well that's a difficult question as those lines have become blurred over the years. Considering the first two categories (and talking broadly): Sound Engineers will install systems to the Sound Designers specification. The Sound Engineer is, fundamentally, an engineer. This means they deal with the information technology side (the nuts and bolts) of sound delivery systems (speakers, PA systems etc.). Sound Designers will then create the audio that goes into those systems.

The lines are blurred because Sound Designers should, generally, be able to design the physical system themselves, while Sound Engineers do have to have a degree of creative ability, craft and imagination to be able to deliver what the show needs. Both professions ideally need a very thorough grasp of the technology and physics of sound delivery. You have to understand how sound moves through air at a very fundamental level. You have to understand that sound is vibrations and waves in order to deliver any kind of emotional content. You have to apply a certain amount of science to the art and vice versa. It's no good being a racing driver without having tyres on the car (or an engine under the hood).

As for Composers, traditionally they create music for the show then deliver it to the production via the Sound Designer, though in more recent years these lines have been blurred slightly.



Brian Gleeson

A Conversation with Jim Norton, playing Maurice

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Jim Norton's extensive stage career has included a long association with Conor McPherson; Jim has performed in eight of Conor's plays, including **PORT AUTHORITY**, **THE VEIL**, and **THE SEAFARER**. He also created the role of Jack in Conor's play **THE WEIR** for the Royal Court in 1997, the part played by Brian Cox in the Donmar's recent revival.

Is this your first time performing at the Donmar?

Yes, that's right. I've never been on this stage. I've been here many times though; most recently a month or so ago when I saw **THE WEIR**.



Jim Norton



Of course you created the role of Jack back in 1997. How was it seeing the play again?

Well actually it's the first time I've ever seen it and, to be honest, I was actually quite nervous. I was sitting there on the first night and actually felt quite nervous for the actors and the audience because I knew what a journey they would all have to make in the next ninety minutes.

But, you know what, within five minutes I'd forgotten all that and was drawn completely into that world. The performances were superb, it's beautifully directed and that space is just so perfect for it.

Do you think the Donmar is good fit for Conor McPherson's work?

I think so. When we did THE WEIR originally we did it upstairs in the Ambassadors Theatre, in a room that held a hundred people or less, and we had them seated on broken down chairs and old benches. We wanted to emphasise the idea that we were in a pub listening to a group of men (and a woman) talking, and that's also the effect I got when watching it at the Donmar. It's interesting that when Conor spoke to me about THE NIGHT ALIVE he classified it in the same way as he had THE WEIR – he said that it was a chamber piece. THE NIGHT ALIVE is a very gentle play and the audience need to get very close to these people. They need to be in the room with them and take the journey with them. There's no better space than the Donmar for doing something like that.

You've now performed in eight productions of Conor's plays – how did that relationship start?

It all started, I suppose, about fifteen years ago in the late 1990s. I'd seen one or two of his plays and then I saw Brian Cox doing SAINT NICHOLAS at the Bush Theatre in 1997 and I just thought it was an amazing piece of writing. I remember thinking "Who is this young Irish writer that I've never heard of? How can someone so young know so much about the human condition?" So I read some of his early works and then I was sent a copy of THE WEIR; so I read that too. This was at a point, I should add, when I was thinking "Theatre's such a hard profession and I've done so much theatre in my life; it's time I stopped and started doing something nice and meaty like a movie or a television show." So I'd said to my agent "I don't think I really want to do any more theatre for a while". So when she said (about THE WEIR) "You have to read this play." I was little wary.

But I read it and I realised that everything I knew about acting and the little I knew about life was in this play and in this character. I immediately felt like I knew who this man was: he was the memory of my father, my uncles and all those people I grew up listening to, and I thought "If I don't play this part... I'm going to die". The part was something I wasn't aware of but I knew, at once, that I'd been waiting for it all my life.

So I'd read it and fallen for it, but I hadn't even been offered it yet! I'd just been sent it. So I went to see Ian Rickson and the casting team at the Royal Court and we chatted and I read, and I read again, and I remember thinking "I don't want to leave this room with you thinking I can't play this part". Then I went home, the phone rang and they said "We'd like you to do it", and that was that.

I was in it for two years; we did it at the Ambassadors Theatre (the new Royal Court hadn't opened yet), then in Dublin, then in the West End, then Toronto, the Brussels, then back to the West End, and then all these men in suits came up to us and said they'd like to take the show to Broadway. So we did that. Then, when it finished in New York I thought again "Right, now I really have got to get myself a television job or a movie or something" but then Conor sent me a copy of PORT AUTHORITY and it blew my socks off. So we did that, and then another and then another and now I've done eight productions of Conor's plays and it's got the point where (as in THE NIGHT ALIVE) when he rings me and says "I've got a new play", I say "I'll do it". I don't even have to read them anymore.

*Jim Norton*

What is it that keeps drawing you back to his plays then?

Someone described him as an “Irish recording angel” and obviously he is, but I think I’d classify him as “European” more than “Irish”. His plays have a universality. There isn’t a community in the world that wouldn’t understand what’s going on in *THE WEIR*, or *THE NIGHT ALIVE*, or *PORT AUTHORITY*, or *THE SEAFARER*. They are plays about loss and redemption and that relates to everybody; to the human condition. I remember that, on one occasion, he said “I know we all die alone but let’s get together and make the process as bearable as possible.” He’s a genius. A wonderful, wonderful mind with a wonderful capacity to put things on stage that make the audience lean forward in their seats and want to know more.

What evidences this so strongly is that invariably, after you’ve done a Conor McPherson play, the audience will wait (more than with any other writer I know) to see you and tell you that it reminded them of something that happened to them. The letters and mail we used to get during *THE WEIR* from people who had lost a child, or had a relationship that went wrong, who suddenly found they wanted to talk about it. They suddenly found they had a licence to talk about it, because there, on the stage, they saw versions of themselves actually articulating what they had been through. It’s very therapeutic, which theatre at its finest can be.

How has it been working with him in rehearsals?

It's an absolutely wonderful experience. I read the play first and, to begin with, try to forget what part I'm playing in it and just read the story, then I can read it again and again and begin working on the character. He creates such a terrific atmosphere in the rehearsal room where he gives the actors absolute freedom to suggest all sorts of things. The great thing as well is that when you're doing a play by an author who's absent (not in rehearsals or dead), it's like investigating the deep sea scrolls but when Conor's in the room he can answer your questions. Sometimes though, he wants you to take a bit of a journey on your own and see what you can bring.

Funnily enough though, he'll let us go in our different directions but it's like a process of distillation for him: he watches what we do, distils out the fine essence and then, suddenly, this easy-going, laid back man becomes shot through with steel saying "Thank you very much for that, that was very good and it's been a very nice two days while you tried it out, but now I want this, and I want this, and I want this".

So with all that experience of Conor and of his writing, how have you found working on THE NIGHT ALIVE?

It's been vastly entertaining. The play is very dark, it's very violent but it's also hysterically funny. The joy about working on it is that we came to realise that these characters care so desperately about each other, they just don't have the emotional grammar to express their feelings. They're inarticulate in many ways but their hearts are good; they're basically good people and the great thing about THE NIGHT ALIVE is that Conor leaves space for the audience to get in there and realise this for themselves. He allows the audience space to look at the play and bring their experience of life to it and I think that's why his plays become such rich and personal experiences. It's why audiences find themselves asking of him "How is it that you know that?" THE NIGHT ALIVE allows us to share feelings of vulnerability and loss and sadness that we don't express and, like the characters, try and hide. A lot of his characters wear masks, emotional masks, to hide behind, but in his plays and especially in THE NIGHT ALIVE, he writes so cleverly that you can see the characters behind; you can see the humanity of the people.

Is that your understanding of "subtext"?

I think it's one of my understandings. Actually, some of the most potent moments in THE NIGHT ALIVE are hugely underwritten. It's in the silences and the unspoken. In fact we even did a rather wonderful exercise in rehearsals when someone was delivering one of these broken speeches, filled with pregnant pauses, and Conor would provide the subtext. He would actually speak it out loud in the gaps between the lines. It was so thrilling we found ourselves saying to him "Why don't you sit in with the audience every day and do that during the play." It's wonderful for us, but you don't even need it. It's so obvious what these people are attempting to say but can't bring themselves to express. They're so tender and they're so secret and they're so delicate.

Do you think this underwritten quality robs the writing of poetry?

Far, far from it! His gift is that he is able to give the common man the ability to raise his speech to a poetic level without it being pretentious. I sent Brian Cox a birthday card recently and I wanted to find a quote from THE WEIR so I pulled out my well-thumbed copy and I sat down and started reading it again and I thought (again) "This play is so beautiful, so well constructed and there are such beautiful things in it, such wonderful phrases that he's given to the most unlikely people. It's like they've unlocked their heart and are finally able to express things." That's poetry.

Do you think this elusive “mystery” which people talk about in reference to Conor’s work (the ghosts and the supernatural) is present in THE NIGHT ALIVE?

Well he certainly asks if there’s a God or not in THE NIGHT ALIVE and if there’s a life hereafter. The characters, like Conor himself, are on that voyage of discovery. The “mystery” comes from that way of living in Ireland where you sat around the fire and listened to our grannies telling us stories. There’s always that possibility that there’s something out there in the night, something knocking at the window. It might just be the wind, or it might be a branch hitting the pane, but our imaginations create another world. He invites the audience into his plays and let their imaginations fill the world.

I asked Conor once if he believed in ghosts and he said “Well, you never know.”

And finally, does it scare you at all delivering a new play?

The one note which Conor has given me on opening nights in the past is “There’s no fear. There is nothing to be afraid of.” With PORT AUTHORITY his final note was “All you have to do is go out there and tell the truth, but you can’t leave the stage until you’ve done so.”

Michael McElhatton



Section 3:

Resources





Spotlight

Spotlight on: Morag Pirrie, Head of Wardrobe, and Sharon Pearson, Deputy Head of Wardrobe

Every production at the Donmar Warehouse offers different challenges in terms of costume; a modern dress production may often be followed by a play which requires each actor to wear a succession of period costumes, or for each costume to be covered in water, paint, or even blood during the course of the show. All of these challenges are dealt with by the theatre's wardrobe department; whether assisting with quick changes or simply rushing to make sure that every costume is washed and ready for the next performance, the Donmar's wardrobe team are crucial to ensuring the smooth running of every production. Working closely with each production's design team, Morag Pirrie and her deputy Sharon Pearson work throughout the run to ensure that for every performance, each actor's costume is in perfect condition.

Could you tell us about the nature of your role at the Donmar?

SHARON: Laundry. It involves lots and lots of laundry!

MORAG: It's the general organisation and maintenance of the costumes the actors wear. We wash them, we repair them, we help the actors get in and out of them. If we're brought in during the production week then we might also have to make some alterations to make sure they fit correctly. It depends on the Designer, Costume Designer and Costume Supervisor though.

Does every show have a specific Costume Designer then?

MORAG: Not necessarily. Some Designers like to design and source all their own costumes while others work with specific Costume Designers.

SHARON: All the shows will have a Costume Supervisor though. He or she works with the Designer and Costume Designer (if there is one) to source all the costumes and then they organise them.

MORAG: Sometimes they need our help, sometimes not; sometimes they do it all themselves and we don't see them at all, then other times they want us involved and we have to do some bits and bobs.

Does the Donmar own its own costumes?

SHARON: Yes, we do have some in our Costume and Prop Store. It's a real treasure trove down there: shelves and shelves of props and costume pieces which we bought for a show and thought, at the end of the show's run, that we might be able to re-use.

MORAG: Sometimes the Costume Supervisor goes along there for some pieces, to have a root around. Usually that's just for rehearsal costume pieces though, before the correct piece of costume has actually been found. A lot of actors talk about how useful it is to start introducing costume pieces into rehearsals sooner rather than later (especially if it's going to be something unusual like period shoes or corsets) so if there's something they need to keep them going (a type of military jacket, or some overalls, or an old rain coat) until the real thing is found, then the Costume Supervisor might well be able to find it in the Store.

There's hundreds of shoes and shirts which could be used, but you just can't get to half of them unless you've got a lot of patience. Some Costume Supervisors like to rummage around though, some of them could rummage for England. You have to be able to really; you can't get to the period costumes as they're all so squashed together but if they've used it before then they're more familiar with it and might want to explore. There's some beautiful things to find if you've got the time.

SHARON: The Designer has a Costume budget though, and they want to use it. They don't need to re-use pieces if they don't want to.

When are your busiest periods during a show's run then?

MORAG: It's the production week: the week when the cast and creative team move from the rehearsal room to the theatre bringing with them all their costume pieces and props. It's bedlam but the bedlam is fun; not knowing what everyone's going to be wearing for the first two or three days then suddenly everything falls into place and you can start to get to know the new actors. Which is lovely.

SHARON: You're getting to know everyone and you've just changed production. The turnover here is great, it's so quick you don't have time to lose interest in anything or fall out with anyone. It's brilliant. You have a nice time on one and then keep your fingers crossed for the next one.

Brian Gleeson



And that's busier than the run of the production itself?

MORAG: Yes, because it's all about sorting where things go and how you're going to get people in and out of costumes. We also have to rehearse any quick changes, when an actor has to change costume really quickly off stage and re-enter a minute later to suggest a different time or place. Once we get into the run of the show the routine takes over and everything becomes a little more relaxed.

Have there been any particularly difficult quick changes during your time at the Donmar?

MORAG: In PARADE we had to put Bertie Carvel into a harness; we had a minute to take everything off him, fit a harness onto him and then redress him completely including a tie and collar studs and everything. It was hilarious. We had to practice and practice and practice because it was so quick.

Are quick changes the biggest challenge?

SHARON: No, it's the mess which needs sorting every day to ensure everything's ready for the next evening (or, even worse, the next matinee). ANNA CHRISTIE left us with piles and piles of soaking wet costumes every evening. The Wardrobe department was like a sauna with steam coming off all these wet clothes.

MORAG: The mucky shows are always the difficult ones. RED was a messy one. At the end of the show each night everything had been covered in red paint so we had to wash absolutely everything, then we found that the paint wouldn't come out of the white t-shirts which Eddie Redmayne was wearing in the show. In the end he had to have a new white t-shirt for every night (two a day on matinee days) because once we got the red paint on it, it wouldn't come out. We now actually have a cupboard filled with hundreds of red t-shirts that Eddie Redmayne wore that are splattered with red paint. We could have sold them. Eddie Redmayne merchandise.

SHARON: Paint everywhere! The whole building was red, all the towels were red. It was mad.

Is there one show you remember particularly fondly?

SHARON: For me it's always KING LEAR. It was only my second show here so it was all new and exciting and, to top it all off, the show needed a lot of hair and make-up work. While I'm officially Deputy Head of Wardrobe, in a past life I worked more with hair and make-up and still love that element of stage-decor most. Morag and I still look at the pictures of KING LEAR and smile. It was a big cast and everyone was so lovely and it was a big show so we had lots to keep us busy but it wasn't too much. There were no quick changes. It was just a really gorgeous experience for everyone.

MORAG: I've done too many now! I used to work in textiles for factories then they had a work placement at Scottish Opera and I've been in theatre ever since. A long time. I've loved so many of the shows I've been on. I have a real attachment to KING LEAR and that company because I toured with it but I don't know if I have a favourite. I just have many many good memories.

Any you can share with us?

MORAG: Well there's the general damage and mess that actors seem to be able to inflict on their costumes. You name it, I've cleaned it off a costume.

SHARON: It's a small theatre so the dressing rooms are small too. It means you have to be careful where you stand and how you move around. You learn quite quickly that bras can be very hazardous if discarded and left on the floor; those hooks can easily get attached to a hoop skirt or long dress. I remember in *TRELAWNY OF THE WELLS* we nearly had an actress walk on stage with a bra dragging along behind her! If it wasn't for an eagle-eyed Stage Manager we'd have had a very embarrassing moment on stage.

MORAG: Ian McKellen asked me to take his socks off for him every night.

SHARON: People would pay good money for that treat.



Michael McElhatton and
Ciarán Hinds

Exercises for use in the classroom

TASK 1 – Getting to grips with the Characters

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Choose one of the characters to work on. Using the following check-list, work through the play, copying verbatim anything that will fit into one (or more) of the lists. It takes time but each person will get to know the play and start sorting out the information it provides for the work ahead.

1. All the facts about the character: reliable biographical information as opposed to characters' opinions: for example, age, relationships, job, where they live, where they grew up, etc.
2. Everything I (the character) say about myself.
3. Everything I say about other characters.
4. Everything other characters say about me.



TASK 2 – What's not being said?

Look at the short extract below.

Tommy: I bumped into this eejit on my way out of Joyce's who said he owed me a pint – he was a bit jarred. But you see I was starving. I'd been promising myself a bag of chips, so... *(He signals with his thumb: 'I left'.)* Only for that I wouldn't even have seen what happened you.

Notice how Conor has included (with "I left") what the character is saying in the silence between words. Now take a look at the longer section below and working in groups, read through the text out loud, and then follow the steps below.

Aimee: It's not going to work, Tommy.

Tommy: Why is it not gonna work?

Aimee: It's just not going to work!

Tommy: What are you talking about?... We say how it works! We did what we had to do, and we'll... This is... This has... And maybe that's... I love you, Aimee, okay? I love you. Okay?

Aimee: You don't even know me, Tommy.

Tommy: I do know you... I do. I always...

Aimee: You're just lonely.

Tommy: Lonely?! I'm not lonely!

Aimee: You are... That's all it is.

Tommy: No, listen...

Aimee: Tommy, I'm gonna go. Okay?

Tommy: Listen, listen, I'm not... you think I'm just some... fool? Who doesn't know what's going on inside his own head? Like I don't know what's going on...? I know what's going on! I know, okay? How long... How long have you been walking around in the world on your own, going home to some mad lunatic every night? And who ever helped you? I did. And I didn't give it a second thought because I've always known you! Okay? I just feel like I always...

Q1

Once you have read through the text, take a moment to discuss the extract in groups. What impression do you get of TOMMY and AIMEE? Using your understanding of the play from Task 1 and any impressions or ideas you get from the tone of the extract, and write down as many things as you can that you learn from this extract about the characters or the world of the play. Highlight in yellow any words or phrases that do not immediately make sense. As a group, try to work out what these might mean.

Q2

Next, highlight in blue any places where Conor has included a pause or an unfinished thought (usually indicated by a "..."). This will allow you to begin to build up a picture of where things things are not being said by the characters in the script. Try and highlight as many things as you can.

Q3

In a group, come up with some new lines of dialogue (individual words, whole sentences, whatever feels appropriate) which would fit in to each of those “...” moments. What are the characters choosing not to say. What would they say if they had the courage. It might be something that the character would say out loud to the other person, or perhaps something which they'd say to themselves. Write each of these onto your extract by the “...” that they fill.

Q4

Allocate two people in your group to play TOMMY and AIMEE and another two people in your group to act as “TOMMY's Inner-Monologue” and “AIMEE's Inner-Monologue”. Re-read the extract out loud but, wherever the “...” pauses come, the Inner-Monologue actors read out the unsaid lines which you've all agreed on. What effect does this have on the performances? What happens if the Inner-Monologue lines are spoken so that the rest of the audience can hear? What happens if they're whispered so only the actors playing TOMMY and AIMEE can hear? Does it change their performance?

Q5

Perform the piece once more without the Inner-Monologue lines. How has it changed from the first reading? Discuss what you've come to understand about sub-text and the unspoken.

Ciarán Hinds and Michael McElhatton



Bibliography and suggestions for further reading:

Other work by Conor McPherson includes:

Conor McPherson, *Plays One* (2011). Includes *Rum and Vodka*, *The Good Thief*, *The Lime Tree Bower*, *Saint Nicholas*.

Conor McPherson, *Plays Two* (2004). Includes *The Weir*, *Dublin Carol*, *Port Authority*, *Come on Over*.

Conor McPherson, *Plays Three* (2013). Includes *Shining City*, *The Seafarer*, *The Birds*, *The Veil*, *The Dance of Death*.

Conor McPherson, *I Went Down* [screenplay], (1997).

Other plays that may be of interest include:

Anton Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard* (1904)

John Synge, *Playboy of the Western World* (1907)

Sean O'Casey, *Juno and the Paycock* (1924)

Texts that were used for research for this guide:

Conor McPherson, 'Late Nights & Proclamations – An Interview' (American Theatre, 1999).

Kevin Kurrane, 'The Structural Elegance of Conor McPherson' (New Hibernia Review, 2006).

Also:

The Beatles, *The White Album* (1968).

Further Reading:

Fintan O'Toole, *Enough is Enough: How to Build a New Republic* (2011)

Elyn Saks, *The Center Cannot Hold: My Journey Through Madness* (2008)

Rachel Moran, *Paid For* (2013)

Central Statistics Office – [Census 2011](#)

About the Donmar Warehouse

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The Donmar Warehouse is an intimate not for profit 251 seat theatre located in the heart of London's West End. Since 1992, under the Artistic Direction of Sam Mendes, Michael Grandage, and now Josie Rourke, the theatre has presented some of London's most memorable theatrical experiences and has garnered critical acclaim at home and abroad. With a diverse artistic policy that includes new writing, contemporary reappraising of European classics, British and American drama and musical theatre, the Donmar has created a reputation for artistic excellence over the last 21 years and has won 43 Olivier Awards, 26 Critics' Circle Awards, 25 Evening Standard Awards, two South Bank Awards and 20 Tony Awards from ten Broadway productions. Alongside the Donmar's productions, we offer a programme of Education events, which includes subsidised tickets, introductory workshops and post show discussions, as well as special projects which give young people an opportunity to involve themselves more closely in the work of the theatre.

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