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Q&A with Frank McGuinness

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Abstract

Since his debut as a playwright with *Baglady* in the early 1980s, Frank McGuinness in his plays, poetry, and his adaptations of classics has interrogated common perceptions of “Irishness” mainly through the lens of sexuality, gender, and human bonding with which to confront public and private losses, often leading his characters to experience a catharsis. The interview is the revised version of the original conversation that took place in Frank McGuinness’s office at University College Dublin, in Summer 2010. Starting with a reflection on issues of sexuality and the Nation in his 1980s plays, McGuinness discusses his playwriting in tandem with his writing poetry, his life, and his faith in the power of love to overcome loss, despair, and isolation.

Keywords: Frank McGuinness, interview, Ireland, queer, sexuality

SG: My first question is about your relationship with theatre critics, especially here in Ireland. I find it alarming, but not surprising, that your more sexually explicit plays were often flawed by critics, and male critics in Dublin in particular – Innocence (1986), Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme (1985)¹ and your other more sexually explicit plays. I wonder whether you think it was more the sexuality or the politics imbued in these text that upset critics, or both?

FMcG: Well, I have to be honest with you: I never really read critics, I don’t. And it’s pure freedom on my part that I just go my own way... You have to remember that *Innocence* was first performed in 1986. Homosexuality was still illegal here; it was not legalised until 1993. It was going to be a very tough call for any Irish audience to deal with the subject, when taken seriously. And it would be an extraordinary tough call to deal with such a complex sexuality as the one I imagined Caravaggio had. I think that the critics were no more ahead of their time than an awful lot of the audience were, and they reflected the audience’s bias and fear. So, I feel that was part and parcel of their negative reaction to the play. That said, there was also an

extremely positive reaction to the play, and it became very much a call that people would fight for, and they defended the right to go and see it. But it was, in Irish terms, ahead of its time. And, anything that is ahead of its time is going to get a rough reception. It just does. And I knew it was to get a rough reception. That's really what I feel about it. I wasn't surprised by the response to it. I wasn't depressed by it. I sort of thought, "Well that's life, that's what they're going to say anyway", because, you know, critics reflect the theatre-going public's taste. They always have and they always will. So, I knew I'd be prepared for it, and I was... I think that they also didn't see the homosexuality in *Sons of Ulster* when it was first performed. They deliberately blanked it out, which pictures the reaction of the majority of the public at the time. I went out of my way to cause trouble, and at some level I got it.

SG: Which shows just how the connections of sexuality and politics have been and still are deliberately left out by most people, in and out of the theatre, whereas instead they are interconnected on so many levels...

FMcG: Absolutely yes! But you know, they found it hard to take. The audience found it hard to take: it's never revived. After all the years I've written it it's never been. But that's that. For example, early this year I thought, "this is the 400th anniversary of Caravaggio's death", and I thought that somebody somewhere would perform *Innocence*, but they didn't. Maybe even a little piece that they would later cut. I feel I was probably wrong when I said it's clever making theatre. Think of *Gates of Gold* (2002), for instance. In the last days of Gabriel's life, in the last days of their relationship, he is, as he always has been, sufficiently violent enough to put everything that he's done under extreme interrogation, and extreme focus, and to dare to say it wasn't not worth it. This is what he dares us to say. But of course, as always Conrad anticipates him, as he sees that the reason why they did it was because it wasn't worth it, saying, "We had the courage to say that. That's why we do it, that's why we know it's worth it: because, paradoxically, it's not worth it". So they have this rather unique understanding of the business around, which corresponds to the rather unique understanding of each other. And that is the success of their life together: that only they could have pursued the lonely journey that they did pursue together. They're full of contradiction, they're full of ironies, but at the root of their love, at the root at their lives, is the sense they gave to it.

SG: And in the end, they really are the only ones who really are able to see this.

FMcG: They're the only ones who are able to understand it and Conrad articulates that in the scene with Cassie, when he speaks about the Venerable

Bede (Scene Six), daring to say to the young director, “What was it worth? You leave nothing behind”. I deliberately did that, and that to me is a great liberation. There is a unique environment around their love. And while they allow people to come near the centre of the circle, they don’t allow people to touch that subject. They’ve learned the hard way and that that’s a very special and unique space that only they can get into.

SG: The so-called “queer culture” has been hiking in Ireland at least since the mid-1990s, which paved the way for criticism to discuss new ways to free individuals from encapsulating notions of sexual, political, and cultural identity. On the other hand, it seems as if there always had already been something inherently eccentric in Irish history and culture, and I think this sometimes shows in your works. Can you say something on this?

FMcG: Well, to me queer culture is not something that I really know too much about, actually. I am gay, but I feel that there’s a world out there with which queer culture deals with, and instead I don’t. I mean, it’s just a language that I don’t get.

SG: There is a thin veil uncovering your depictions of women as figures of acceptance of and resistance to the role of “Mother(s) Ireland”. I find it very incisive when you define Rima, in Dolly West’s Kitchen (1999), “an anarchic spirit, despairing for her sorely unhappy children” (3). Don’t you find it an appropriate metaphor of Ireland’s troubled past, and in particular as regards the connection of women with the idea of Nation?

FMcG: I never made that kind of equation. I feel it is a very dangerous one to do, both for the Nation and for the women. You know, if you look at it, there’s always been a tendency in my plays to stand up to the mother, or to take on a mother’s role: Rebecca does it in *The Factory Girls* (1982). In *Dolly West’s Kitchen*, yes, Rima is worrying and despairing for her children, but she comes to die, and she actually dies in the play. And the part of that play is about your mother’s death, and you having got to survive that death, the fact that she’s not there to complete you and to guide you, and to lead you for the rest of your existence. In the play, Rima is very deeply aware of her own mortality. She knows that she doesn’t have much longer to go, and that confirms everything that she’s doing. She is a woman of astonishing strength, a woman of very deep insight – imaginative insight. She can read people and read situations with great speed and quiet accuracy. But she’s also a woman who has made a terrible mess of her life – her choice of partner, her decision to have children: none of it has really brought her liberation, and none of this has really brought her the kind of achievement that will lead her to feel she has done something that has been substantial with

her existence. So, under a certain aspect Rima dies in grief and from loss, while at the same time absolving her children from feeling responsible for that. She tells them, “You’re good kids”, but she dies a desperately broken woman. It has been a mistake on people’s part to imagine that I write these very positive, very strong images of woman. I do try to have strong images of woman, but I don’t idealise them. I’m in fact deeply critical of many of the decisions they’ve made in their lives. And that has been the case to write through all that I’ve written. And I’ll certainly never make the mistake of the Kathleen Ni Houlihan figure: I don’t write about Ireland as a woman, I don’t try to put women as embodiments of Ireland. Everybody in my play has made a series of individual choices that has made them what they are. But some of these choice have been economic, some of them have been sexual, some of them have been psychological, and some of them all three. And they’ve come about because of the consequence of these women being Irish. But none of them is seeking to assume the mantle of the nation upon themselves, because that, I think it is a very dated and very dangerous concept. I’ve always found Ireland as a woman to be ludicrous actually, a silly personification. It’s a convention that has way outgrown its use actually, and in the long run, you know I would never do that with them. I hope that I created a highly individual, highly flawed and highly strong woman, and that’s what I’m setting up to do in exploring the role of the mother, the role of the wife, the role of the worker, the role of the independent woman I want to highlight.

SG: That’s probably why the women in your plays are powerful images, because you deal with roles, you don’t idealise the role itself.

FMcG: Absolutely not. And as I said, they said they are very strong, but they are also very flawed. Always very flawed...

SG: And complex characters, not easy at all to get into...

FMcG: They’re not easy people. They’re just not. A classic example is *Carthaginians*, where there are three radically different and radically damaged women, three differently damaged women there in that graveyard².

SG: In an interview for the Irish Sunday Independent³, you pointed out that AIDS has influenced your writing since Sons of Ulster. I think there are marked, though artful references to the AIDS crisis in Carthaginians and Innocence. Hopes and fears of Aids are there in The Bird Sanctuary (1993). And of course, there is that song, “Sleep” that you wrote for a friend’s death. Can you say something more on this, and about AIDS within the contexts of your plays?

FMcG: I was never aware of the AIDS crisis really until the mid-1980s, same as I think a lot of people were on that respect, but I've always thought it was rather alarmingly prescient that when I was writing *Sons of Ulster* – about eight young men living under the shadow of Death, in the First World War, eight young men of one generation gone out and to a battlefield, many of whom will not come back – that this was when the AIDS virus, without us knowing it, was spreading like a wildfire through the gay community, certainly in America. And I've always felt that there is an affinity between the circumstances of the illness, and the circumstances right from the play without my knowing it. I absolutely make that point, but I don't think it's pushing it to say that. That is something that did happen. After the arrival of AIDS in Ireland, and knowing people who developed it, of course, the subject became more pressing and more obvious. And there are very direct references in *Innocence* to the disease, to what it is dying of disease, and in *Carthaginians* as well, in one of Hark's speeches⁴. And then in *The Bird Sanctuary*, written many years later, over nearly ten years after *Sons of Ulster* Tina finally confronts the grief of what is lost, and the cruelty of those immune to loss. So, over a ten-year-period, I think it is fair to say that the subject was there, in the foreground of my mind actually, but I never particularly wanted to write or to furnish an AIDS play, largely because other people were doing it. And I really felt that that was their subject. I actually felt that really it was the province of journalists and researchers, and television on following to do it. I had no great desire to exclusively concentrate on the subject, largely because, as I said, it was something that was already there. And then I think of when one of my close friends died from AIDS in 1995, that was a big turning point for me. The subject didn't diminish in importance for me, or anything; but I felt that his death was actually the major statement that I had to make, what was going to be made in my life, that he had died and I was mourning.

SG: And that was when you wrote "Sleep".

FMcG: "Sleep" came then, yes. Also if you look at *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* there's an analogy there, for Adam, the American who dies, he doesn't die from AIDS, he got shot, but it's very easy to extend what's been said there it's my elegy for my generation. Now, I'm not trying to trivialise this, but I went to San Francisco, and it was only when I went there that I recognise the sheer scale, the sheer numbers who have died from my generation, because there were so few men in the gay community left my age. I decided to grow a beard as an act of mourning, and I haven't shaved the beard.

SG: Also, for a very long time, there was this connection of the language of AIDS and the language of war...

FMcG: It was a dreadful time, there is no question about that. It was a very hard time. And any gay men in their thirties in the 1980s was going to be radically effected by the reality of AIDS.

SG: AIDS discourse has been a matter of love and death. The two are prominent themes in your writing. In my view, this is more acutely expressed in Gates of Gold, in the negativity of death and the gold metaphorically represented by love and affection. Could we say that beauty, I mean real beauty as represented in this play, is actually in death?

FMcG: Well, it's in loyalty, real beauty is in loyalty, and the lasting of love. In the play, Ryan is a beautiful boy, a very beautiful boy. But that mask of his, the mask of beauty hides a gigantic insecurity, a violence... the deepest violence of not knowing who you are and frantically searching for what defines you, "What am I?". You know, he's not even sure if he's gay or straight in the play – he moves in many directions. He keeps inflicting sorrow on himself, he keeps inflicting the potential for even more sorrow on himself, he keeps betraying people, he keeps looking for material wealth, he keeps looking for his father in everybody that he meets, and he'll never find that, he's never going to find that. Whereas in Gabriel and in Conrad there is a different type of violence, there is a violence that is more in the wounding of each other, and the knowledge of each other. On one level, they know too much about each other through living together for so long. Ryan doesn't know who he is; Alma has a good idea of who she is; and Cassie is whoever she wants to be. These are just facts that are not to be pondered, but those three – Alma, Conrad, and Gabriel – are victims of excessive knowledge, if you like: that it can come over, too, as a psychic burden to bear, and that can wound you. Gabriel mostly wounds Conrad, but Conrad is extremely adept at avoiding punches, if you think of it. Gabriel has lashed at so many so often before, and with such dexterity and expertise, but Conrad is usually up to it. And that is the supreme pleasure of pain in Gabriel: "I've got you. I've got you. I've wounded you". But at the end of the play, what is beautiful is survival. They're accustomed to each other, and they have come through. It ends not with the death; it ends with a kiss. That's very important in a play about dying: one is living. That to me is the whole journey in the play, a journey towards that kiss, and towards that breath, which is the continuation of their life together. And because they have this intense, fractious, unpredictable marriage, it will go on, while one of them goes on. It is a titanic moment!

SG: In an interview with Anthony Roche, you have claimed that Gene in There Came a Gipsy Riding (2007) literally urges all his family to follow him in the grave (2010, 12). Do you think embracing this theory of negativity, this

mourning of trauma – also in relation to Ireland’s past – may work productively in terms of identities no longer oppressive?

FMcG: Well, remember this is what Margaret, his mother reads in the letter. I’m not giving away anything when I say that originally her name was Kathleen: I decided to change her name to Margaret so that people would have been under no confusion about whether she was Kathleen Ni Houlihan or Ireland. The truth is that I have an Aunt Margaret and I have an Aunt Kathleen, so I went from my aunt Kathleen and my aunt Margaret to find the name. They’re not this woman, but that’s the basic fact of it... And I think that you must remember that Margaret in the play has an extremely strange relationship with this boy that I very deliberately didn’t elaborate on, I didn’t articulate too much who Gene was – why he did it, what does he like. It’s all left for other people to imagine. What I feel is happening to Margaret at this stage of her career, at this stage of her life is that absolute exhaustion has cracked into her existence. All of her life she has to achieve more and more to affirm herself, and this exhaustion takes the form of hyperactivity, hyper-energy. So that when she does read the letter, you can see it is she who frames what Gene wants to do, as Gene will well know she would, that’s how close they are in there... You know, that is only her in her despair and in her desire, to stop the voices, to stop the work, to stop the demands upon herself that she makes all the time. It may be her who is urging this on her family, not the dead son and maybe it’s her guilt at what she has done. That’s what maybe goes on there.

SG: She always seem to be wanting to keep everything and everyone under control, while at the same time letting out this feeling that she’s actually losing control, that things are going to be shattering...

FMcG: Yes. Absolutely. Well, nothing could be the same after this weekend. Absolutely nothing could be the same. That approach that she has, that speech that she has when she talks about her own violent upbringing and all that was done to her: the children can never forget they’ve heard this from their mother; it’s going to explain an awful lot about her. They don’t know how each of them is going to have to deal with it. But the world has changed after this weekend. What happens this weekend is the direct consequence of the bomb that Eugene sets off when he kills himself.

SG: My former questions were evidently inspired by the issue of Irish University Review celebrating your career. In the article you have written for the journal, you say that of all businesses, theatre business is “rarely truth or rarer still, realism” (1) which is a very striking statement on theatre. Can you say something more on how truth and fiction play with each other in your writing

for the stage – because they always seem to play with each other – and how not only actual truth and fiction, but also how people may read something as truth or fiction, and how people may read this ongoing play between them?

FMcG: Well, again, the matter in my last play (*Greta Garbo Came to Donegal*, 2010) is simply, that Greta Garbo did come to Donegal. That is true. She came in 1976, I think. I made her come in 1967 because 1976 was the height of the horror in the North of Ireland, really it was a terrible time, and I didn't want to write about that particular period, the background, but I was very intrigued about writing on 1967, when things were absolutely stirring – the explosion was about to happen – and I wanted Garbo to come and to be, if you like, a catalyst for many unspoken tension within the family that she finds herself in, so there is a truth and a fiction working together. The geographical truth is that she came to Donegal but not exactly to where I put her. The historical truth is she came in 1976, the imagined truth that she came in 1967. There is something that happens at a very basic level. And if you look at all the plays, most of the plays I've written like *The Factory Girls*, my mother and my aunts were all factory women, but they differ, they were never involved in any strike of any kind let alone taking over an office. So, there's truth and fiction working together. And in *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*, my partner, Philip, he's an English man, a lecturer of Old and Middle English, but he never went to Lebanon, he was never captured – again, there is truth and fiction working out together. So, if you like, I may start with a basis in truth, but I need to turn it into a fiction: that's for me the business of writing, the business of imagining for the stage. And similarly, you know, I feel that realism on the stage is dead, because the cinema does it better and television does it better. I did this television play called *A Short Stay in Switzerland* which is about a woman going Zurich for assisted suicide; I simply knew that the actual act of drinking the potion would be immensely more effective as a television act than as a stage act because of the close-up – you watch her doing it. There's a brutal fact about it, actually, that is, if I wish to write a realistic story – this was the most realistic piece I've ever done because I was rooting it in an actual woman's journey in an actual family going with her – I would choose to do it on television. I've no regret for that. But I am terribly reluctant to embrace another story for television. If I do it, it'll probably be another true, real story, because that's the medium that suits it, theatre doesn't suit that, my theatre certainly doesn't. If you look at the life of Caravaggio, I take a few facts, and then weave another story from it, such a completely different story from it. He becomes someone with mutability. I take a few facts as, you know, Edmund Spenser wrote part of *The Faerie Queen* in Ireland. Everything else is invented, everything, but that is fact. And I just let subjecting this trills to a marginal pressure from fiction.

SG: And, how does your poetry fit within this perspective on truth and fiction, theatre and TV?

FMcG: Well, I think the poetry will be a more accurate gate to life in terms of biographical detail than plays ever will be. I kind of deliberately leave a lot of poems rough and unfinished, because that's not my medium, my medium is the theatre, but I enjoy the release of poetry, I enjoy the fact that if you are in a hotel room you can draft a sonnet that you can carry around. It keeps the mind operating. The most ambitious thing I've done in poetry is this sixty sequence, sixty sonnets, which I think is an enormously ambitious task to set yourself if you're not a poet. I let the game of that, I let the joy of evolving different line forms and seeing if it would be possible to tackle sixty sonnets on this theme. And you know, I'm very proud of that as a technical achievement. Other people may regard it "technically as too harsh". I do. So that's what I would say about it: the life is closer to the poems in a weird way. It's closer in a way I wouldn't want the plays to be. But I like the poems because as I said they're rougher and they're not my main call, my main art form.

SG: Do you think this affects your feeling more comfortable with poetry, in terms of releasing yourself?

FMcG: I would think so. There's certainly a childhood, there's certainly a lot closer memories of childhood directly in poetry than they are in the plays, but the poems are really an alternative – well no, alternative is not the word –, they're a relief from the plays, that's what they are. I don't worry too much about the reception of them, to be honest with you. Because I love books – I think that Gallery produces beautiful books – I take them seriously and I don't throw things together. You know, if you were to look at my archives here, if you looked at the work that I take with poems, I am very careful with them. I do a lot of versions and then I put them together. The poems are a very useful complement to the plays.

SG: In your Greta Garbo Came to Donegal, you come back "home" – to Donegal – as much as you come back to focus on women...

FMcG: Very much. Yes...

SG: Was this coming back home for you an urge? And, how do you relate this choice to finding home "elsewhere", itself a very powerful message you often convey in your plays?

FMcG: In Greta Garbo Came to Donegal I just decided to add some part of the script at home. The fact is that I only found that Greta Garbo

went to Donegal because I'm a great admirer, and I had to write a play about that, there is no question of it and then there was the question of getting the format: if she came to Ireland and she came to Donegal, and was going stuck in Donegal there was question for what part of Donegal it was going to be, and I decided that my own part, Buncrana was the ideal place to bring her because it's ten miles from the border. This is the right place for her to come, because for me Garbo was this extraordinary creature of instinct and intelligence, the instinctive intelligence. So within some days of being there, she has read not only the situation within the family, she's read the situation within the country. She knows, she hasn't had the vocabulary for Republicans and Nationalist, and Loyalist at that sort, but she recognises trouble when she sees it. She is too good an actress not to know when something is seriously starting. So that's why I put her there, I so suppose Garbo dictated when and where would we go, and because she dictated it, I was coming to it as an alien as well. I was looking at my own environment through alien eyes and I could construct it that way. Also, I thought that because Garbo was coming as alien – she's European, she's American – she would bring a different sensibility – a combined sensibility – on Ireland-England while she was there. She was very much the muse – what a horrible term! –, but she was very much the guide through the play, and with her I felt that there was a sufficient attachment and essence to go home, without fears of being swamped, or anything else.

SG: July 2009 marked the 25th anniversary of Sons of Ulster with a production at Hampstead Theatre in London. Did the event offer you a chance to look back at your career, and in what terms?

FMcG: No, I don't look back. I just don't.

SG: If you were stranded on a deserted island, what novel, play, and city would you bring with you?

FMcG: I'd bring *Pride and Prejudice*, *Hamlet*, and Florence. You may not appreciate Florence... I do!

Notes

¹ From here onwards *Sons of Ulster*.

² Greta, Macla, Sarah.

³ Interview by Joe Jackson (2002).

⁴ "Tell me what's between your legs. Is there anything between your legs? Is there anything between your legs? (Hark grabs Dido's groin.) Is the united Ireland between your legs? What happens when cocks unite? Disease, boy, disease" (McGuinness 1996 [1988], 314).

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