

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The 'Truthful Masks' of Micheál mac Liammóir

By Maya Cantu

An artist of extravagant talents and flamboyant character, Micheál mac Liammóir (1899-1978) assumed a medley of roles at Dublin's legendary Gate Theater, which he co-founded with partner Hilton Edwards. Described by *The Irish Times* as "the dominant figure in the Irish theatrical world for almost half a century," mac Liammóir spellbound audiences in Dublin and around the world as actor, dramatist, raconteur, poet, painter, and stage designer. In 1978, Dr. Patrick Hillery, the President of Ireland, memorialized his many contributions to the nation's arts and letters: "The death of Micheál mac Liammóir leaves a deep void in Irish cultural life... He dedicated his life to Ireland and offered her all the splendid gifts which he could give in so rich and diverse a manner."

Irish culture and identity inspired much of mac Liammóir's writing. Setting out to marry the "mythological world which Yeats had shrouded in twilight" with a "modern commonplace world," mac Liammóir's plays included the Celtic romance *Diarmuid and Gráinne* (1928); *Where Stars Walk* (1940), which critic Seamus Kelly called "a drawing room comedy as witty and brittle as Coward, but with an inimitable Dublin flavor;" and the psychological fantasy *Ill Met by Moonlight* (1946), in which a wicked changeling appears to take the place of a young actress, newly married to the nephew of a Connemara folklorist.

Only years after his death did an astonishing secret emerge: the "quintessential Irishman" (in the words of Simon Callow) had been the romantic invention of the Englishman Alfred Willmore, for whom the persona of Micheál mac Liammóir became the role of a lifetime. The story of Alfred Willmore's metamorphosis, first revealed in a 1990 biography, stunned the Irish theatre world, including many who had known the artist well. Actor Bill Golding recalled to RTÉ Radio in 1998: "I had no reason, nor did anybody else who came along, not to believe absolutely that he was an Irishman." In his 1946 memoir, *All for Hecuba*, mac Liammóir wove a tale of growing up by "the drowsy, flower-grown walls of Cork," before his Irish family emigrated to London.

Yet, if mac Liammóir spent decades concealing the truth of his English origins, his lifetime of masquerade informed a varied and richly theatrical body of work. His plays artfully explore themes of performance and authenticity; the interplay between reality and illusion; and, in the words of mac Liammóir's hero Oscar Wilde, "the truth of masks." As Richard Pine observes: mac Liammóir "was someone pretending to be himself. He placed it at the center of all of his plays."¹

Younger brother to four sisters, Alfred Willmore was born on October 25, 1899 in Kensal Green, London, where his father worked as a corn merchant. Bullied at school for his "girliness," he later recorded (in his fictionalized memoir, *Enter A Goldfish*) his feelings of displacement: "It seemed to him he would always be looking out of a window at grey monotonous streets, looking out and dreaming of somewhere else, of somebody else. But of where? Of whom?" At the age of ten, the stage-struck boy was invited to audition for the actor-manager Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree. He quickly became one of London's most in-demand child actors, appearing onstage with the young Noël Coward in *Peter Pan* and in the title role of *Oliver Twist*. Ageing out of his child stardom, Willmore enrolled at the Willesden Polytechnic; with the help of a patron, he moved on to the prestigious Slade School of Art.

At the Slade School, Willmore met fellow student Máire O'Keefe, who intensified an infatuation with Irish language, culture and folklore first awakened by the Abbey Theatre's London visits, as

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well as by the mythic nationalism of W.B. Yeats. "*Ireland and the Arts* was the name of the (Yeats) essay, and I believe it changed my life," he later wrote. Studying Irish at the Gaelic League, Willmore changed his name to Micheál mac Liammóir, and in 1917 he relocated with O'Keefe to her mother's seaside home in Howth, outside Dublin. Here, he started to mythologize a new identity as an Irishman, while working primarily as a painter and illustrator. He also explored his sexuality, as he traveled throughout the Continent: "Really, Micheál's affairs (with men) are so numerous I can't keep pace with them," O'Keefe (herself a bisexual woman) noted in one letter.² When O'Keefe died of tuberculosis in 1927,

a devastated mac Liammóir returned to the theater, touring the Irish countryside with Anew McMaster's Company.



Hilton Edwards and Micheál mac Liammóir outside of the Gate Theater in Dublin, 1972.

On tour, mac Liammóir encountered actor-director Hilton Edwards, who became his professional and romantic partner. The year 1928 marked two milestones for mac Liammóir: his role in establishing the country's first Irish-language theater, Galway's An Taibhdhearc, and, with Edwards, the founding of the Gate Theatre. The Gate opened with an ambitious season that included Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, Wilde's *Salome*, and Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*. Complementing the legendary national Abbey Theatre, the Gate revolutionized the Irish stage with its cosmopolitan ethos and modernist stagecraft. Both innovated as designers: Edwards with lighting, and mac Liammóir with sets and costumes. At the same time that they led the Gate, "the Boys" also presided as one of

Dublin's few visibly gay couples. The company introduced Dublin theatergoers to important works by European and American dramatists, as well as new plays by Irish dramatists such as Denis Johnston, Mary Manning, Hazel Ellis, and Maura Laverty.

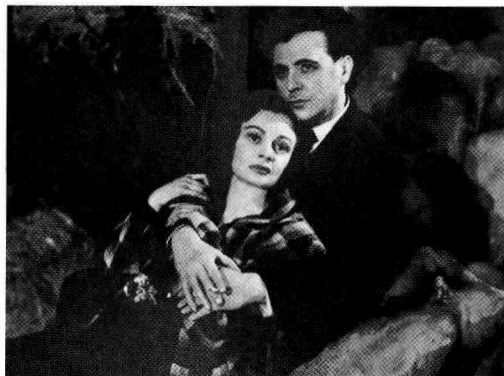
Described by Manning as a "magic lure for youthful talent," the Gate also launched the careers of Orson Welles, James Mason, and, in the 1960s, playwright Brian Friel. Welles' time at the Gate started a particularly enduring collaboration. In 1931, the sixteen-year-old Welles, on a summer trip through Ireland, showed up at the Gate, and majestically "introduced himself as Mr. Orson Welles, a celebrated actor from the Broadway stage." Seeing through the bluff, mac Liammóir and Edwards gladly cast "the brash young greenhorn."³ In 1958, Welles told RTÉ Radio: "They were so generously and courageously ready to give a strange newcomer that extraordinary chance." Reuniting with Welles, mac Liammóir later played Iago in the director's 1952 film adaptation of *Othello*. He also toured through Germany with Welles, Edwards, and Eartha Kitt (as Helen of Troy) in *Time Runs*, Welles' 1950 adaptation of *Doctor Faustus*.

The Mountains Look Different (1948) was a peak of Mac Liammóir's ten produced plays and eight adaptations. Drawing from Greek drama as well as O'Neill's *Anna Christie* (which the Gate had produced in 1929 and 1943), mac Liammóir provoked heated controversy with his drama, in which the playwright appeared as Tom Grealish. The play riled the mores of President Éamon de Valera's conservative Catholic Ireland. Audience protests flared at the theater, and the Legion of Mary accused the play of "immorality," asserting: "(a) 'there were no Irish prostitutes in London; (b) that no Irish Catholic would have anything to do with a prostitute.'"⁴ Despite the protests, the play

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proved popular with Dublin theatergoers; Gabriel Fallon, in *The Standard*, called it a play of "great beauty...spare, swiftly moving, and theatrically efficient." In 1970, mac Liammóir translated *The Mountains Look Different* into Irish, when it was revived at the Abbey Theatre.

Blending his talents as an actor and playwright, mac Liammóir enjoyed international success in 1960, with his one-man show about Wilde, *The Importance of Being Oscar*. Here, the London-born Irishman created a nuanced theatrical portrait of the Irish-born, London-bound legend. As Terence de Vere White noted: Oscar Wilde was a "mold into which he could pour his own personality, a mirror in which he saw his own reflection." ^v Mac Liammóir's later plays included the autobiographical *Prelude in Kazbek Street* (1973), which explored the masquerades of Dublin-born Serge Kovalevsky (né John Cassidy), a *premier danseur* in Paris struggling to express his sexual identity as freely as his art.



Sheila Burrell as Bairbre and Micheál mac Liammóir as Tom in the Gate Theatre production of *The Mountains Look Different*, 1948.

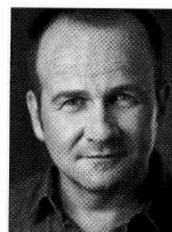
Receiving such honors as Dublin's Seal of the Freedom of the City, Micheál mac Liammóir died in Dublin on March 6, 1978, his English roots still a well-kept secret. As Micheál Ó hAodha explained: "Those who knew did not talk; those who talked did not know." At his funeral, the artist was mourned by hundreds of friends and admirers, including President Hillery. De Vere White commented, "No Irish actor, no political figure of our time, was so loved."

Only in 1990, with the publication of Ó hAodha's biography *The Importance of Being Micheál*, was the story of Alfred Willmore's transformation revealed. Since the late 20th century, an increasing number of biographers, including Christopher Fitz-Simon and Tom Madden, have explored the complex layers of mac Liammóir's identity. Richard Pine speculates, that, living in a society in which "homosexual behavior was a criminal offense," mac Liammóir's Irish persona evoked "a donning of motley to persuade the world that he was 'other,' to win acceptance as all actors, of whatever persuasion, strove to do. He had something to hide and something to discover." ^{vi}

For all that he concealed his past as Alfred Willmore, Micheál mac Liammóir devoted his "remarkably fertile and diverse range of talents" ^{vii} passionately and with complete sincerity to the Irish theatre. He remains a national institution and icon. In *All for Hecuba*, mac Liammóir wrote of giving his all for Ireland, even at the expense of pursuing greater fame in England or America: "And I wondered was I right to choose the narrow Irish road.... For good or for evil, the Irish way was a part of myself; there really had been no choice at all."

ⁱ Pine, Richard. "Micheál mac Liammóir: The Erotic-Exotic and the Dublin Gate Theatre," *The Gate Theatre, Dublin: Inspiration and Craft*, eds. David Clare, Des Lally and Patrick Lonergan. Dublin: Carysfort Press Ltd., 2018, pg. 68. ⁱⁱ Madden, Tom. *The Making of an Artist: Creating the Irishman Micheál mac Liammóir*. Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2015, pg. 191. ⁱⁱⁱ Welles, Orson. RTE Radio 1, "Documentary on One: Hilton and Micheál," Feb. 23, 1958. ^{iv} Fallon, Gabriel. Program note for *The Mountains Look Different*, Abbey Theatre revival, 1970. Courtesy of Mairéad Delaney, Abbey Theatre. ^v De Vere White, Terence. *Enter Certain Players*, ed. Peter Luke. Dublin: the Dolmen Press, 1978, pg. 29. ^{vi} "Micheál mac Liammóir: The Erotic-Exotic and the Dublin Gate Theatre," pg. 68. ^{vii} Desmond Rushe, *Enter Certain Players*, pg. 66.

WHO'S WHO: CAST



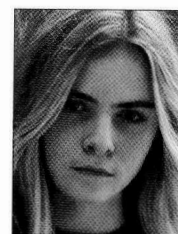
CIARAN BYRNE

(Priest) Ciaran is a Company Member of The Irish Repertory Theatre and a Resident Artist at Nancy Manocherian's The Cell.

Select Theatre: *The*

Dead 1904, Irish Rep & Dot Dot Productions (Adapted by Paul Muldoon & Jean Hanff Korelitz, Ciaran O'Reilly Dir.), *Juno And The Paycock*, Irish Rep (Charlotte Moore Dir.), *The Freedom Of The City*, Irish Rep (Ciaran O'Reilly Dir.), *Blood*, The Cell (Kira Simring Dir.), *Moment*, Studio Theatre (Ethan McSweeney Dir.), *The Night Alive*, City Theatre (Tracy Brigden Dir.), *Observe The Sons Of Ulster Marching Towards The Somme*, PICT Classic Theatre (Matt Torney Dir.) Film & Television: *The Second Sun*, Haymarket Annex II & Michael Mailer Films (Festival de Cannes, Hollywood Film Festival Official Selection), John Buffalo Mailer's *DIERY* (Haymarket Annex II, Executive Producer Martin Tuchman, Produced and Directed by Jennifer Gelfer), "Public Morals" TNT (written and directed by Edward Burns, produced by Steven Spielberg). Representation, Harden Curtis Kirsten Riley (HCKR Agency). Special Thanks to Lee Brock.

Jumpers for Goalposts (Studio Theatre, Helen Hayes nomination), *The Secret Garden* (Denver Center), *Peter and the Starcatcher* (Pioneer Theatre Co.), *Amazing Grace* (Goodspeed). London: *Eugenius* (The Other Palace). Cabaret: Jazz at Lincoln Center, Town Hall (NYC), Venetian Room (Dallas), Gaslight Theater (St. Louis), L'Auguste Théâtre, Café Universel (Paris). Recipient of Nightlife, Bistro, and Julie Wilson Awards. Graduate of the Boston Conservatory.



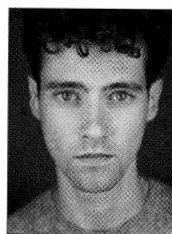
McKENNA

QUIGLEY

HARRINGTON

(Bridin) McKenna is a senior performance major in the theatre program at Fordham University Lincoln

Center. Previous Fordham credits include *Icarus's Mother*, *Blasted*, *The Way West*, *Macbeth*, and *Dark Play or Stories for Boys*, the last of which she looks forward to taking to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August! She spent the fall of 2018 studying in Mexico City, where she performed in the musical *Hoy No Me Puedo Levantar* and was a recurring role on the telenovela "La Promesa." She grew up in Mexico and Nashville, but, like so many, the Harringtons came over from County Cork and the Quigleys from Mayo. She would like to thank Aidan, Jonathan, Jeff, and the whole Mint team for giving her this incredible opportunity. Love to Mom, Dad, Griffin, and Catherine, and to her best friends Ella, Austin, Elizabeth, Joe, and Miles!



LIAM FORDE

(Batty Wallace) Liam is delighted to be making his Mint Theater debut. Off-Broadway: *Much Ado About Nothing* (TFANA), *Big, Six Wives* (York). Regional: *Hand to God*

(Studio Theatre, Helen Hayes Award),