



## **The ballad of the wild Ginger Man - J.P. Donleavy and Irish Theatre censorship**

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Publication Date	2017-12-23
Publisher	RTÉ

JP Donleavy is best known for *The Ginger Man*, but the problems with the stage adaptation of the novel in 1959 showed the cultural censorship at work in Ireland at that time.

The late J.P. Donleavy was one of the great writers of the modern era. Part of a literary coterie of bohemian Dublin of the 1950s and 1960s, Donleavy's circle included such remarkable figures as Brendan Behan, Patrick Kavanagh, Edna O'Brien, John Ryan and many others. Roaming from watering holes like Davy Byrnes to the Palace bar, this meeting of minds produced great literary works in prose, fiction, drama and poetry which shape and reflect upon modern Ireland. Donleavy, or Mike as he was more widely known to those around him, passed away this year at the age of 91. Born in Brooklyn in April 1926 and educated at Trinity College between 1946 and 1949, he was the writer of over twenty books on Ireland and its people and places.

Donleavy is most frequently remembered for one novel in particular. *The Ginger Man* was published in 1955, without the prior consent of the author, as part of a semi-pornographic imprint (the *Traveller's Compendium*) from a Paris-based publishing house, Olympia Press, which was run by Maurice Girodias. Long and lengthy legal battles followed between Donleavy and Girodias to release the publishing rights for the work. In one of the great literary coups, Donleavy successfully (but anonymously at the time) bought the publishing house itself when it was for sale in 1970. This meant that Donleavy was therefore suing himself so the case was quickly dropped.

In giving us Sebastian Dangerfield and *The Ginger Man*, Donleavy gave us both one of the great literary characters and one of the great Dublin novels. Straight from the Joycean playbook, Dangerfield roves Dublin as a rogue Bloom-like figure, presenting a Dublin that is hyperbole but only just. It is peppered by real-life figures, from Brendan Behan to Gaijin Crist, the "Ginger Man" himself.

But like James Joyce, Sean O'Casey and Samuel Beckett, Ireland rejected the work of genius. Threatened by the stage adaptation of the play, the overpowering influence of the Catholic Church hierarchy (notably Archbishop John Charles McQuaid) saw that *The Ginger Man* the play would be cancelled after just three performances at Dublin's Gaiety Theatre in 1959.

### **Cultural censorship**

It was and still is one of the most overtly blatant examples of cultural censorship in Ireland. It later prompted Donleavy to publish the script of the play with a preface entitled *What They Did in Dublin to the Ginger Man – A Play* in 1961. It became difficult to separate the on-stage action from the off-stage dramatics. No official or legislated censorship was in operation in Ireland at this time, compared to the United Kingdom, where all plays were submitted prior to production to the Office

of the Lord Chamberlain for approval. Yet the 1950s earned an accurate reputation as a depressing and frustrating time for Irish writers, dramatic producers and playwrights.

### **The Ginger Man was a watershed moment in Irish theatre**

Irish theatre, in the form of its national theatre at least, was losing touch with a passing older and more conservative generation and also failing to reinvent itself and connect with the emerging and worldlier younger generation. Director at the Abbey Theatre, Hugh Hunt, who did bring reformist influences in direction and management, notes this particular spiritual and artistic malaise at the Abbey Theatre in 1951. "Not only has the Abbey grown estranged from its oldest and best friends", he said, "but more grievously it has failed to win the respect of a younger generation who had deserted to other theatres."

The closure of plays like *The Ginger Man* was a watershed moment in Irish theatre. The play was designed to be deliberately provocative to the Irish state and its people and set out to be an Irish *Look Back in Anger*, John Osborne's play that ushered in the "angry young men" movement. As censorship began to tighten its grip on Irish theatre, literature and magazines, a distinct diatribe developed between Archbishop McQuaid and Irish theatre audiences. Plays like *The Bishop's Bonfire* by Sean O'Casey in 1955 were roundly attacked in conservative press such as *The Standard* and the *Irish Press* for their moral ineptitude. The play still attracted record audiences, with over 2,000 people crowding outside the theatre seeking admission on one occasion. It was an example of the mutual confrontation between Church opinion and audience desire.

A large number of Irish novels were adapted for the stage at this time, including the work of such censored writers as Joyce, John McGahern and Frank O'Connor. This was in itself an act of artistic subversion and a flouting in a perfectly legitimate way of the pervasive and erratic censorship of literature in Ireland. One reason for this level of effort by the Catholic Church to maintain the system of censorship through State channels was to remove literature which was critical of the entrenched and conservative Catholicism of Ireland, especially from the reading consumption of Irish youth.

### **"A heaven beyond heaven"**

In 1953, Donleavy was based in New York where he was restless and eager to return to Ireland, where he had only recently left with his wife and children. "For all its impoverished liberties and encrustations of crut that one had railed against", Ireland for Donleavy "now loomed as a heaven beyond heaven."

In 1956 Donleavy began experimenting with writing for dramatic and theatrical production. A public call issued from the BBC's Excellence in Radio Drama prompted the writer to begin work in earnest on a piece of drama. He dramatised the opening scenes of a new play, then entitled *Helen*, a play set in New York. Though not completed to a full-length piece for some years, it would also be the beginning for Donleavy's 1973 novel, *Fairy Tale of New York*. The short play, *Helen*, was shortlisted by the BBC for broadcast and this experience was a defining moment in his theatrical development. He describes how he "soon was to find [him]self amid actors and listening carefully as [his] words ethereally floated out over loud-speakers to an English public still listening to the radio." In the *Irish Times*, further debate ensued about the indecency and vulgarity of Donleavy's play.

The *Ginger Man* was first performed in London's Fortune Theatre in September 1959, not long after Brendan Behan's own success with *The Hostage*. Publicity surrounding both these plays in London would struggle to separate the renegade talent of both writers and friends. Behan was in fact the first person to read the manuscript of *The Ginger Man* and also makes a cameo appearance in the novel as the wild Barney Berry. Harold Hobson, theatre critic at *The Sunday Times*, warmly paired Donleavy's play with Behan's as the "two modern plays in London through which blows the winds of genius".

The play was scheduled to transfer to Dublin from London in October 1959 with Richard Harris in the leading role of Dangerfield. The adaption of the *Ginger Man* and its branding transcended popular culture and the poster for the Dublin run at the Gaiety Theatre featured Harris prominently in its design. The positioning of Harris as the embodiment of what the book and the character of Dangerfield represented would be a further stick with which to beat the play. Harris was fast earning a reputation as a noted actor, socialite and sex symbol in London and his playboy standing would add to the play's attraction to a curious Dublin audience, drawn to this new play coming direct from a London première.

In the *Irish Times*, 2 November 1959, further debate ensued about the indecency and vulgarity of Donleavy's play. At the Wexford Festival Forum, a wide-ranging discussion on aspects of contemporary Irish culture and theatre was held and it was uniformly agreed that official censorship of the theatre in Ireland was not a desirable thing to aspire to.

Chairman of CIE (Coras Íompar Éireann) Dr. C.S. Andrews noted that "twice in Dublin recently [he had] seen public opinion outraged and it was deplorable that such plays should be staged." When asked if he was referring to *Sive* or *The Ginger Man*, Andrews replied that he had not seen *Sive* but that *The Ginger Man* went far beyond the bounds of decency. "It is one of the worst things I have

ever seen on the stage. There is not much difference between it and the strip-tease in the Windmill in London."

### **Enter Dangerfield**

The play begins in the rented and dilapidated flat of the Dangerfields, situated at 1 Mohammed Road, Dublin. The opening stage directions describe in detail the interior of the flat, located in a south suburb of Dublin city. It is a chaotic mess. Implements and signs of navigation and exploration are scattered about the stage. Dangerfield "sits on a stuffy armchair. He watches three chairs in front of him on which are signs: twelve o'clock, three o'clock, six o'clock. A large celestial telescope stands lonely at the window. On an orange box sits an old gramophone. On the wall are three pictures of ships in distress"

The world outside the flat is in perpetual motion. The stasis of Dangerfield's interior world is at odds with the increasingly growing fast pace of both urban and suburban Dublin life. When the exterior threatens to enter and intervene in the interior and private world, Dangerfield panics and seeks to hide, unsure how to reconcile the private with the public.

Dangerfield and his only friend Kenneth O'Keefe are a duo of lost and disillusioned young men who expect more than what society and opportunity has afforded them. Instead they live week-to-week on the allowance afforded them under the G.I. Bill:

O'Keefe: "These guys at Trinity thank all American's are loaded with dough and I'm starving. You get your check yet?"

The opening scene sets the tone and subversive message of the play by presenting a deliberate criticism on Irish Church and State, the shallow advancement of the Irish middle-classes and the exploitation and inequality of Ireland, both domestically and publicly, towards women. Dangerfield is a crass, drunken, violent, manipulative self-promoter while O'Keefe is a weak, uncommitted and unconfident loner. The latter is dazzled by the bravado and performative life of extravagance portrayed by Dangerfield, as he constantly seeks the impossible goal of a comfortable middle-class existence and sexual gratification to match his desires.

The play attacks the myth that Ireland was an uniformly economically vibrant country at this time following the election of Seán Lemass to the office of Taoiseach and the publication of the T.K. Whitaker's Programme for Economic Expansion. O'Keefe bears out the frustration of many of those who did not see or be part of economic progression: "I'm hounded through streets, beaten to the wall, scratching up pennies and for the first time in months I've got a few beans to have a bath and a

haircut and get out, you come and push me to the wall again...nothing new. Same damn pattern. Despair, frustration, misery".

What O'Keefe aspires to, and what Donleavy challenges through this play, is the comfortable and shallow middle-class life. The new Holy Trinity, as far as O'Keefe is concerned, is chiefly money, food and sex. Donleavy's play highlighted important issues to Irish audiences and readers. One such case was the rejection of Noel Browne's "Mother and Child Scheme" in 1951, which was branded as "anti-family" when the outlook was more evidently anti-woman. Marion, Dangerfield's long-suffering wife, vocalises these institutional rejections of female equality. "I want to be free instead of hiding behind these walls", she cries.

The status of women was under debate in Dáil Éireann at the time. A debate on the decision to lift the marriage ban on female teachers was held in the Dáil on 20th and 27th February 1958, with the Minister for Education not committing to any decision. It would be over a decade later before the Commission on the Status of Women would bring an interim report for discussion in the Seanad and Dáil in 1972 with the final report coming in 1973. Bringing the motion then before the Seanad in July 1973, then senator and future president of Ireland, Mary Robinson, moved the motion in support of the report to the Seanad "with real pleasure because I regard this report as the most important social document in recent Irish history."

By its third performance, *The Ginger Man* had made the front page of the Irish Times. "Gaiety Play Withdrawn" ran the headline on the story on 29 October 1959 signalling the end of Donleavy's play. "The theatre was half-full last night and the audience repeatedly applauded portions of the play. A few people left at the end of the second act and did not return".

The review of the play from the Irish Times, some two days earlier noted "the mingled love and loathing of Dublin, expressed in words that glitter and cut like a welding torch is not a pastiche of Joyce, but a recreation...Mr. Donleavy almost achieves his ambition of turning Dangerfield into a latter-day Hamlet. Last night's production brought only a few shouts from the audience...Philip Wiseman's production is brilliant."

On the day after the play was cancelled, Richard Harris wrote directly to the archbishop on letterhead from Jury's Hotel, College Green, Dublin. In an openly apologetic and likely tongue-in-cheek manner, Harris sought the forgiveness of the archbishop for any offence to "our religion" in performing in the play. Harris also outlines that he accepts responsibility for his part in supporting

the play performed in in unexpurgated form and in not agreeing to the cuts as suggested by a representative of McQuaid (likely to have been Fr Gerard Nolan S.J.). Harris wrote that "[he] approached the part [of Dangerfield] as a Catholic, found from the sentiments and theme of the play that though it was without the façade of purity, it was honest and most artistic in its taste".

Following the opening night, the Gaeity Theatre's manager Louis Elliman immediately demanded Donleavy and Wiseman make cuts to the text. After the second night's performance, Elliman issued an ultimatum that the cuts must be made to the passages "objectionable and offensive to taste and opinion here". Elliman now was at risk of having his bluff called. He reverted to his previous ultimatum of 'cuts or closure' and took the decision at that moment to close the play or risk legal proceedings for breach of contract. He called the playwright and director or their supposed breach before they had a chance to even draw their weapon. It was an unfair duel. The play was over before it had fully begun.

Donleavy left Ireland for England the day after the closure of the play and spoke of the disappointment of the episode. He also hit out at McQuaid and the Catholic Church's policy of enforcing censorship upon works of deemed moral indecency, saying: "if the Archbishop had seen the play it might have been different."

The personal toll was also evident on the playwright, as Donleavy admitted to be "shattered and shocked" but not surprised that Ireland's conservative Catholic Church outlook on artistic criticism would ferment closure of the play on grounds of blasphemy: "There is a terrible amount of confusion between the cast, myself and the management...I thought there might be trouble with the play in Dublin but I did not think it would lead to this."

The *Ginger Man* was a watershed moment in Irish theatre. It proved to be a clear statement of artistic defiance against Irish traditional orthodoxies and opened a door for more progressive works of the new wave of Irish drama and dramatists in the 1960s. The loss to all readers earlier this year on the passing of Donleavy was keenly felt. But the loss of Donleavy to Irish theatre was first felt over half a century ago. God's mercy on the wild *Ginger Man*.