

Between the Lines of . . . *The Cripple of Inishmaan*



For our second play of the 2011-2012 season, Riverside Theatre is excited to present Martin McDonagh's *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, a dark comedy about a physically challenged young man who dreams of leaving his isolated Irish island to become a Hollywood star.

We have many events coming up to help you immerse in the world of 1930's Ireland.

On Saturday, October 15 at 7:30 p.m., come to Riverside to see a performance by the Irish music ensemble The Beggarmen – whose recorded music will also be used in *The Cripple of Inishmaan*. Tickets are \$20, \$15 for youth and college students, and all proceeds will benefit Riverside Theatre.

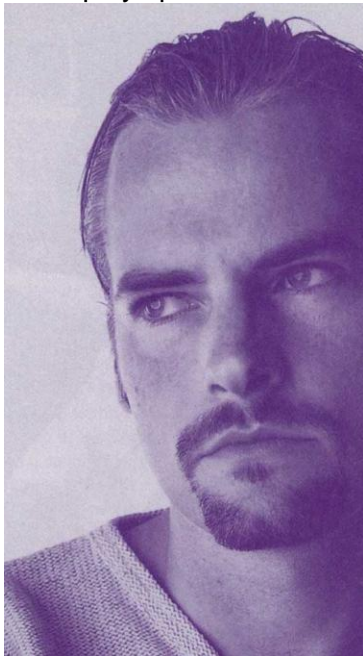
Our free Thursday Theatre talk will be October 20 at 5:30 p.m. Join us to get more information on the play from director Ron Clark and Ray Heffner, a scholar of Irish literature.

Our Talkback Sunday will be October 30, immediately following the matinee performance. This is an opportunity to talk with the director and actors about the play.

The art exhibit in the theatre's lobby during the production will feature photographs of rural Ireland by Iowa City photographer Thomas Weingeist.

Playwright: Martin McDonagh

Even though Martin McDonagh was born in 1970 and has only been writing plays since the mid-1990's, he is one of the most prolific, widely-produced playwrights to come out of the British Isles since the Elizabethan era. He is the only playwright other than Shakespeare to have four of his plays performed at once in London.



His first six plays were written as trilogies, loosely bound by a common setting and themes. *The Cripple of Inishmaan* is the first of his Aran Islands Trilogy, which also includes *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* and the unproduced *The Banshees of Inisherin*.

McDonagh's plays are marked by a wicked sense of humor and folksy characters, which makes it even more shocking when they experience dark moments and sudden, brutal violence. These elements have become more prominent as McDonagh started screenwriting. His films have met the same instant success as his plays. In 2006, McDonagh won the Academy Award for his short film *Six Shooter*, starring Brendan Gleeson as a man who encounters strange events during a train ride after his wife's death. In 2008, he earned an Academy Award nomination for the screenplay of his first full-length film, *In Bruges*, in which Colin Farrell and Brendan Gleeson play hit men who take a vacation to the Belgian town of Bruges after a hit goes horribly wrong.

Elliot Schwartz© 1998

McDonagh was born in London, but he maintains a connection to his Irish heritage that forms an important backdrop to all of his plays. As we will see in *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, he uses his work to comment on the changing nature of Irish nationalism. The long-held attitudes of the older generation might not apply anymore after 100 years of an independent Irish state and increasing globalization. There are treatments of Irish nationalist sentiments in McDonagh's plays that come across as, according to Irish author Finton O'Toole, "a parody by a young English playwright of Irish parentage who, like most of his generation, sees the old-fashioned nationalist view of Irish-English relations as something laughable."

His influences for his style of storytelling have been mainly American films, though he is aware of the rich tradition of Irish storytelling. In an interview, he said:

*"Now that I am an Irish storyteller, I've told Irish stories. It's interesting to come back and see things with that perspective, knowing that there were Irish storytellers in the countryside telling the myths, the stories, the legends. I think that was the spark that gave me the idea for *The Banshees of Inisheer*. But it would be phony of me to say I have anything to do with Irish storytelling. The plays are Irish stories, and I hope someday they'll be recognized as Irish stories... But for me, now, I feel kind of phony. Maybe I'm just having a bad morning. I hope someday they'll be regarded as true Irish stories, I don't think they are at this minute. It will take a long time for the baggage of me being a Londoner to be in the past."*

To read an in-depth interview with Martin McDonagh, [CLICK HERE](#).

In Bruges and *Six Shooter* (included in *A Collection of 2005 Academy Award Nominated Short Films*) are available on DVD for FREE at the Iowa City Public Library.

The Play: *The Cripple of Inishmaan*

Martin McDonagh wrote *The Cripple of Inishmaan* as the first in a trilogy of plays about the Aran Islands, a group of three isolated islands off of the west coast of Ireland. Set on the island of Inishmaan in the 1930's, it centers on a time when a filmmaker comes to make a documentary about life on the island. Everybody sees this as a chance to escape the monotony of the island--and no one wants to escape more than "Cripple Billy," a physically challenged teen boy who has been the subject of the town's ridicule ever since his parents died under mysterious circumstances.

The first production of the play opened on December 12, 1996 at the Royal National Theatre in London. Productions in New York and Los Angeles followed in 1998. The script received much critical acclaim, with critic Elyse Sommer proclaiming, "Mr. McDonagh once again proves himself an adept story teller, with a keen eye and ear for capturing both the humor and sadness of people trapped in lives devoid of social or cultural stimulus or economic advantages."

The Setting: The Isle of Inishmaan

The Cripple of Inishmaan takes place on Inishmaan, the middle island among the three Aran Islands in the Galway Bay off the west coast of Ireland. Today, it has a population of 160, the least populated of the Aran Islands (and also least touristy.) Inishmaan is part of the Gaeltacht, the region of Ireland where many people still speak Irish Gaelic as a native language.

The terrain of Inishmaan is mainly limestone, topped with distinctive deep cracks called “grikes.” The limestone cliffs at the island’s edge have become popular with rock climbers. The island has a long growing season, and soil that can support a diversity of plants. For hundreds of years, the best of this soil was owned by a few wealthy landowners.

The Cripple of Inishmaan is not the only contribution the island has made to the world of theatre. Irish playwright John Millington Synge spent his summers on the island from 1898-1902. Many believe that his visits to Inishmaan were the inspiration behind his classic plays, *The Playboy of the Western World* and *Riders to the Sea*. Like *Cripple*, these plays also focus on the many ways people and relationships are affected by living in isolated places.



Synge's Cottage (Photo by Eckhard Pecher)

Though the play is tied to the setting of Inishmaan, the play was only produced on the island of Inishmaan for the first time this past June. To read about that production, [CLICK HERE](#).

The Background: *Man of Aran*

In *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, a filmmaker comes to the Aran Islands to make a documentary, with everybody clamoring to play a “role” in the film. McDonagh based this on a real life event. In the 1931, filmmaker Robert J. Flaherty came to the Aran Islands to film a documentary about the hardship of island life. It was released in 1934 as *Man of Aran*, winning critical acclaim (including the Mussolini Cup at the Venice Film Festival later that year.) It portrays a stark world of struggle, where dialogue is incidental to actions necessary to survive.



Flaherty first achieved success with *Nanook of the North* (1922), a film about the life of an Inuit man, which became the first commercially successful documentary feature. For most of his career, he made films focusing on native people living under extreme conditions, doing what they could to work with a harsh environment that could destroy them at any moment. By filming ordinary people instead of actors, his films laid the groundwork for ethnographic film, a technique anthropologists use to document cultures.

Though his films were compelling in their depiction of the eternal conflict of man vs. nature, the authenticity of the actions depicted were greatly exaggerated. In 1978, George Stoney, a filmmaker and whose father was born on the

island, released *How the Myth Was Made*, a documentary about the impact of *Man of Aran* on the people of Inishmaan. In the process, Stoney exposes the artifice of Flaherty's film. The family members in *Man* were not actually related, but rather picked out from local islanders based on who would look the best on camera. The events in the film were mostly staged. In particular, the climactic scene featured a form of shark hunting that hadn't been done on the island for at least 50 years before filming, but Flaherty included it because he had a "very strong eye on the box office, and fighting a shark as big as that would be exciting for the audience." (He also hoped that it would reignite the shark industry on the island, bringing more income to its mostly impoverished population.) As PJ Mullen, the son of Flaherty's assistant director, explained to Stoney, the actual killing of the shark was achieved by harpooning a piece of solid peat and editing in shark footage.

Flaherty is credited as being the first documentary filmmaker, but coupled with the first documentaries came the first examples of "creating reality"--re-staging events, writing dialogue, and fueling action that the people in front of the camera would never think to do on their own. Arthur Calder-Marshall, Flaherty's biographer, explained, "Flaherty wasn't interested in actuality. He was interested in his own idea of life [. . .] He didn't care what was going on. It was how he could fit what was going on into his vision about what life was about."

Today, we watch "reality TV" and are perpetually shocked with every scandal. A competition was rigged, a seemingly-happy couple was only staying together for the sake of the cameras, and conversations that never happened are edited together to make it seem like they did. These things are not a sign that "reality TV" or documentaries are growing corrupt. Artificiality has been present from the very beginning of the art form, in an attempt to make reality more interesting--to make real life seem more "real."

To watch a clip from *Man of Aran*, [CLICK HERE](#).

To watch a clip of *How the Myth Was Made*, [CLICK HERE](#).

To watch a clip of Robert J. Flaherty explaining how he selected the cast, [CLICK HERE](#).

Man of Aran and *Nanook of the North* are available on DVD for FREE at the Iowa City Public Library.

How the Myth Was Made is available as a special feature on the *Man of Aran* DVD.

The History: A Timeline of Irish History Before 1934

- 1845 to 1852--The Great Irish Potato Famine: A blight kills off a majority of the potato crop on the island of Ireland, at the time a part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Many Irish Catholics depended on the potato as their main source of food because much arable land in Ireland was devoted to raising crops and cattle for export to Great Britain. As a result, about 1 million people died and 1 million more emigrated to the United States, causing the island's population to fall 20-25%. It was a loss that would permanently affect Ireland demographically, financially, and culturally.
In Inishmaan, the population fell 10-20% during this time.

- April 24, 1916--The Easter Rising: The Irish Republican Brotherhood occupies several government buildings and issues the Proclamation of the Irish Republic. The group surrendered five days later.
- January 21, 1919--Elected Irish representatives defy the United Kingdom's Parliament and convenes as the first Irish Parliament, known as the First Dáil. On the same day, members of the Irish Republican Army kill several members of the Royal Irish Constabulary, which was connected to British power. This was the first act of the Irish War of Independence.
- December 6, 1921--The Irish War of Independence ends when the British government and members representing the Irish Republic sign the Anglo-Irish Treaty, creating the Free State of Ireland. The Free State was now a separate entity from the United Kingdom (except for the 6 counties that make up Northern Ireland), but still within the realm of the British Empire and under a British head of state.
- June 28, 1922--The Irish Civil War is fought between supporters of the Anglo-Irish Treaty and those who opposed the treaty as a betrayal of the idea of an independent Irish Republic. The anti-Treaty forces surrendered in 1923. The Irish Free State would not be called "Ireland" until 1937, and would not completely sever ties to the British government until 1949.