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Saturday 28 June 2014

WEEKEND

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DIRECTOR'S CUT

ENDA WALSH interviews his long-time friend
and creative collaborator **CILLIAN MURPHY**



Double *act*

Cillian Murphy and good friend Enda Walsh discuss art, film, theatre and fame. Moderated by **DARRAGH MCMANUS**

Actor Cillian Murphy and writer-director Enda Walsh have had a fruitful relationship — professional and personal — stretching back almost 20 years. Both cut their teeth in the now-iconic play 'Disco Pigs', for Cork's Corcadorca in 1996.

Murphy has become an award-winning, global star of stage and screen, his resume including 'Batman', 'The Wind That Shakes the Barley', 'Playboy of the Western World' and TV's 'Peaky Blinders'.

Walsh is award-winning too, including a Tony for adapting 'Once' for theatre. His plays include 'The Walworth Farce', 'Bedbound' and a reworked 'Clockwork Orange'. He also wrote the Michael Fassbender film 'Hunger'.

Enda and Cillian have also worked together since 'Disco Pigs', bringing 'Misterman' to London in 2011. They reunite again in 'Ballyturk', a Landmark Productions and Galway International Arts Festival co-production co-starring Mikel Murfi and Stephen Rea, which premieres at the Galway Arts Festival on July 10.

We brought them together for an interview with a difference — Enda posed the questions, not us — though it's ultimately a conversation between two close friends. They seem completely at ease together: joking, debating, agreeing, reminiscing, sometimes even finishing each other's sentences... a closeness almost of twins. It was fascinating to observe these highly intelligent, creative people discussing art, collaboration, camaraderie, fame, and how theatre immerses you in the moment like nothing else...

EW: Cillian. Lovely to talk to you!

CM: Lovely to see you.

I don't know much about your early life, how you got into acting. Are there actors in your family?

Not that I know of. Certainly no professionals. Acting never occurred to me until I met you and Pat [Kiernan, 'Disco Pigs' director].

Were you an extrovert as a child?

No. I was always doing characters, doing shtick, you know, messing. Sometimes we'd record ourselves. Music was the thing; that's what I wanted to do. Then I saw 'A Clockwork Orange' in Sir Henry's [1995], and that blew my head off.

Did you think, 'When I go to university, I'm going to have a go at that?'

I did a Frank McGuinness play with the Dramat in UCC [Cillian studied law for a time]. With Des Bishop and Cathal Murray!

With that first role, did you feel like you needed to perform?

Totally. It was weird, I felt very safe on-stage from the beginning. It felt natural, "trying on" other personalities. I liked how immersive it is, especially where you have to go deep and disappear from yourself. 'Disco Pigs' was the first play where I really experienced that.

I think a good actor needs to be immersed in the moment, the detail of it. At the same time, you might have to carry the whole play. Do you feel that? I think you do it very well.

It's hard for me to judge. You've seen me act enough times, I guess you'd know. But when theatre works, it feels effortless. Everything is in the right spot and you're not thinking consciously. It's subliminal; you're just in it. That's why actors keep going back to theatre; we want that feeling of immersion. You never get it in film.

Music probably gave me the same rush of live performance [Cillian had a band in his late-teens]. But it never had that immersive quality. I wasn't a very good guitar player. The other guys could really play; you could see them disappear into the music. I could arrange, and sing, but never got to that point of losing myself; I was conscious of my technical limitations. I realised early on there was a ceiling to my musical abilities. Whereas when I started acting, I felt I could keep pushing it.

Well technically, music's hard! There's something about acting: you feel if you stay in the same space long enough, you'll get better.

Someone said it takes 30 years to make a

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good actor. That made sense. I had youthful confidence starting out, but technically didn't know what I was doing. Then you start working, reading, broaden your mind, understand the craft, get some maturity, life experience... It takes a while to become a good actor.

'Disco Pigs' was formative for all of us: we'd made this work that was a part of us, about the city, our stamp on it. The heart of it came from you two [Cillian and Eileen Walsh]. It was shaped around your incredible energy. I've done other theatre since: Chekhov, Synge, stuff like that. But I think you spoiled me. Or corrupted me! 'Disco Pigs' was visceral, physical... you'd come out exhausted, emotionally and physically. And hopefully the audience were changed in some way.

We all felt at the time, it wasn't just about the play — it was the moment, the zeitgeist. Theatre can capture that sometimes; look between the cracks and say, 'This is how things are.'

Totally agree. It captured something at that time, in Cork. Then other people related to it. Remember we saw it a few years ago in the Young Vic? It was mad seeing

all the references to Roy Keane and Phil Babb.

It was a bit surreal; we'd made it so specific to that time. But it needed to be disposable and transient. The play was 'live', you know? In terms of shape, it had life and then it died.

Absolutely.

You seem attracted to work that's collaborative, not just about your performance. As you get older, part of you wants a say in the sound, the look, everything. Which is how it should be.

That's how we work together. It's lucky, we have similar tastes, sense of humour; interested in exploring the same things. And I didn't train, I sort of got spat into this, so I've only had my instincts to rely on. The longer I do it, the more I hang onto them. And you've always trusted actors' instincts, because you trust your own.

The only thing you have is your instinct. Everything else is 'business'. You have to listen to your gut.

Life is too short not to. You could keep working, but if you're ignoring your head and heart... it's foolish. That's where great work happens, where those meet.

Between 1996 and now, do you feel your gut instinct is the same?

I don't know. Working in film or television is completely different to theatre. I had to hone different muscles for screen work. What I missed from theatre — the sort you make — was acting with your whole body. In film, it's mostly close-up. You're watching a person think. On-stage, it's whole-body. It's an amazing gift, to do that. I'll always want to, it's so liberating. In theatre, everything is a 'wide-shot'.

Our 'close-up' is stillness. You run yourself into the ground, the audience gasps, and then... stop. Then that stillness begins to break; things start moving. You and Mikel in 'Ballyturk', you're putting so much pressure on the self, you can't take it anymore. You have to stop, and start using the head. Life might be simpler if we didn't have bodies. I love exploring that stuff. It's fascinating. You and Mikel are very funny. Physically, you do funny things, gags, walks. You never get to do that in film.

Never! I don't get sent funny scripts. That's fine, I don't particularly want to. But people say, 'You never do comedy' — actually I do a lot on-stage. I love doing it. We all enjoy it; that stupid, funny stuff.

You wanted us to do something silly together. 'Write something for me and Mikel that has 5000 jokes.'

Terrible jokes! I've wanted to act with Mikel for ages anyway, do a proper play together. Since I started, probably, going to Barabbas shows, hanging out, working together [Mikel was movement director on 'Misterman']. We'd done bits >>

◀ and bobs, but never a full play. He's the most giving actor. Himself and Stephen, they're such different energies — the dynamic between them is something.

You have incredible energy; I watch you in films and think, 'How does he not go insane waiting around on set?' How do you switch off that energy when filming?

I find it tricky. The old adage, 'They pay you for waiting around, the acting is free'.

It's a discipline I've had to learn. You expend energy some other way — running, whatever. It's hard. But I understand the principle of film-making: capturing tiny moments, giving them to the director, who assembles the film out of those. Obviously you can only play those moments, whereas in theatre, you play the whole story — and with an audience there.

I never know how things will turn out in film. If you're not the lead, you might not even be in it. Sometimes it can be extraordinary — sometimes it's shit! With theatre, you're right there. Also, in film, you're limpet-like attached to the director, this constant close exchange. With theatre, once the show is up, it's up. The director might see new things during performances, but it's in the actors' hands. We have to manage it.

You and Mikel are always examining the play, making sure it grows. That's important; you want it to evolve into something else.

Your work in particular keeps giving back. The more you throw at a play, the more it gives. Even after doing 'Misterman' for so long, there was more to be mined. And that'll be produced around the world, and people will continue finding new things. That's the beauty of it.

You're always circling ideas and going into other areas. That freedom is the best thing about theatre.

Theatre can be so bad — but it can be so profoundly brilliant. You're always chasing that.

I know you're obsessed with music. How has that affected your understanding of theatre?

The power of music to move people, aligned with actors' performances, can be incredible. You use music a lot, but not to the point where it's overwhelming. I like theatre, or music or film, which alters you in some way. You don't want to be indifferent. You want to go, 'Jesus! That was unbelievable'.

Theatre uses words and that can be a handicap — people might feel it has to be literal. With music, or abstract art, you don't need to understand. You have a reaction, you engage with the whole thing. Whereas a play with a strong polemic, which might have come from the newspaper — there's no space for the audience's imagination. You want to sketch something that allows them in, gives them space to think and dream.

You want people asking each other, 'Well, what did you think? You read what into it?' The amount of different interpretations is extraordinary. Art should never be prescriptive. You want people bringing themselves to it.

The way we work, I never feel I've



MEETING OF MINDS: Enda and Cillian both worked on play 'Disco Pigs'

directed the play. I'm sitting down and you guys are acting, but it's almost like the room is directing.

Yes, but it's always clear who's leading. The best directors are the best collaborators. But for an actor, if you think the person in charge is floundering, or isn't confident, the whole house of cards collapses. You may ask us what we think, but you still know what it's going to be.

I know the guts of it, what it might do to people. But the shape it'll take, the 'stuff' of the play... I don't know that at the beginning.

The trust there is massive. That's why people collaborate. There's no messing around, just straight to work. We don't need time to get reacquainted; we're hanging out all the time anyway.

'Ballyturk' has been hugely influenced by you and Mikel, as individuals... I see a lot of you within those characters.

And yet, it'll go on to be played by hundreds of others.

It feels as though the play always existed. Written by our friendships over the years, and we sort of tripped over it. What about the future — will you want to direct?

No, I could never direct theatre. I just don't have it. As a player, I understand the fourth wall, but can't visualise it as a director. I understand how to shoot a movie, or telly, but not theatre. I don't have your confidence, maybe. You've always known, innately, what would hit an audience.

Yet when you're on stage, you understand the detail of catching an audience — navigating them through the play. I'm about the larger form; how do we hold them, make them laugh, break their hearts.

I don't want people leaving the theatre saying, 'That was a lovely evening, shall we get something to eat?' I want them exhausted. You're like that, too.

How has fame impacted on your work? Fame is completely outside me; I've no con-

trol over it, and no interest. All I've ever tried to do is make worthwhile work, and improve as a performer. That other stuff is just noise. It's inconsequential. At the same time, I recognise we have to do press, because we want to sell a product. I understand the relationship between art and commerce. But it's still about the four of us in a rehearsal room.

And you know what, fame has never impinged on my life negatively — because I've chosen to live a certain way. People think it's difficult to remain private, but it's easy. Stay at home! Be with your friends. It's that easy. ■

'Ballyturk', a Landmark Productions and Galway International Arts Festival co-production, has its world premiere in Galway on July 10. All Galway shows are sold out, but tickets are available when the show tours in The Olympia Theatre, Dublin (August 7-23), Cork Opera House (August 26-30) and the National Theatre, London (September 11 to October 11). See ballyturk.com