

The ACT of CILLIAN

From stage to screen and back again, Cillian Murphy is an actor who goes where the art takes him, from *Peaky Blinders* to the latest Enda Walsh play. **Donal O'Donoghue** meets the unconventional one

Actors are always that mixture of confidence and deep insecurity", says Cillian Murphy. He sips his water. "Always", he emphasises, "but I think you need that mixture. You couldn't be one or the other because you wouldn't survive. You need that push and pull between the two because there is that need to not show off, but to perform. There is also this essential element where you have to reveals bits of yourself and that's not easy. I find stage a much safer place than film. Why? Because theatre is ephemeral, it's here today and gone tomorrow whereas film is there forever."

Cillian Murphy is an actor hiding in plain sight. Today, in a quiet club in Dublin, he's doing what he probably likes least: talking about his work and himself. The subject is ostensibly *Ballyturk*, the latest play from Enda Walsh, the gifted writer who gave Murphy his big break with the electric *Disco Pigs* and with whom he reunited for the equally mesmeric *Misterman*. Walsh is also somewhere in the building, as are Murphy's co-stars, Mikel Murfi and Stephen Rea. The writer and his cast have taken a day off from rehearsal in a studio in Kilburn, north London (not far from where Walsh and Murphy both live) to flesh the press.

It's a couple of weeks after wrapping the second season of the BBC gangster drama, *Peaky Blinders* and Cillian Murphy still has the criminal haircut. He sips his iced water, locks me with those brilliant blue eyes and struggles to make sense of a world that wants it all and wants it now. "I am perturbed how people want everything before the fact nowadays", he says. "Not just you guys, journalists, but everyone wants to know what's going on before it happens so it's nice to be able to protect something (the play? himself?). That's so sad but that's the nature of things now."

He is reluctant to nail any definition of *Ballyturk* to a mast. "It's not really a play that you can talk about in terms of its terrific plot because it's not that sort of play", he says. "It seems silly to reduce it to 'What is the play about?' There will be people who will reduce it to a tiny plot but it's not that. I don't think we should be prescriptive or didactic: it should be just 'Come and see it'. And people are. The Galway Arts Festival production has sold out and after that it plays in Dublin and Cork before transferring to the National Theatre in London.

Murphy is a reticent star: even that word probably sets his teeth on edge. For him it is all about the art and craft of acting. Of course, actors say this all the time. Murphy, though, walks the walk, someone who has always shied away from the red carpet and chooses his work carefully, whether on stage (*The Playboy of the Western World* with Druid) or screen

(Christopher Nolan's *Batman* trilogy, Ron Howard's imminent seafaring epic, *In The Heart of the Sea*). He does what appeals to him, projects that tickle his actor's interest, that piques his instincts. He says he's instinctively drawn to ambiguous characters.

"I'm neither interested in playing the clean-cut hero nor the nefarious villain", he says. "Human beings are just bundles of walking contradictions. If you think of any of the great characters in literature or film or theatre, they are conflicted and ambiguous. That's the drama." Like Tom Shelby in *Peaky Blinders*, a man riven with ambiguity. It is

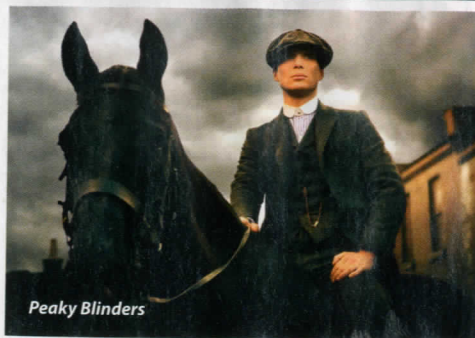
“They know what I do but they are not impressed”
(on his two sons)



Ballyturk



Red Eye



Peaky Blinders

a great performance in a compelling show but no awards yet. At the BAFTAs, Murphy's co-star, Sam Neill, said that *Peaky Blinders* had been snubbed. Would Murphy agree? He laughs. "Sam is a funny guy", he says. "Awards are so arbitrary. To say that one thing is better than another is crazy."

Murphy once said that 'Lucky' should be his middle name. "I was definitely lucky to get a break with *Disco Pigs* when I was a young fellow but then you have to use that", he says now. He did. When we first met in 1999 – I interviewed Michael Gambon and Murphy for a Gaiety Theatre production of Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* – the 23-year-old was taking his first tentative steps on the ladder. A quiet young man, intense yet grounded, who asked whether I might give his grandmother a mention in the article. Later came the big breaks and the transforming roles: Danny Boyle cast him in *28 Days Later*, Kitten in *Breakfast on Pluto*, the rebel heart of Ken Loach's Palme D'Or-winning *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*, the Scarecrow in the *Batman* films.

When he attended the Presentation Brothers in Cork, the boy from Ballintemple was a rebel, or as he put it once "a little bastard up until fourth year." For a brief time he was suspended. So what changed? "I got sense, which I lost again pretty quickly", he laughs. "It wasn't worth the hassle just fighting all the time, it was better to just do the work. But Billy [Wall, his English teacher] was an influence. I knew that I could never be a writer. I wrote music, bits and bobs (with his brother, Páidí, he was in the band Sons of Mister Greengenes) but when you're lucky enough to work with really great writers you realise it's not for you. I also feel that I have a lot more to prove as an actor."

His biggest hang-up as an actor is that he hasn't done a classical role. "I'm lacking in confidence", he says. "I didn't train and classical text still feels slightly alien to me. They have been done so well, so many times, but by such wonderful actors. I want to pin my colours to new writing, to go after the new plays. I would like to do a classical play at the right time, but the idea of doing a year now at the RSC is something that would have me quaking in my boots. That's just the way it is."

He lives in north London with his wife, visual artist Yvonne McGuinness, and their two sons, Malachy and Carrick. They get to Ireland now and again. "It's important for the kids that they get out of London and go west and go wild in west Cork or Kerry or Clare or wherever", he says. Fatherhood has changed him in unexpected ways. I read that he sometimes cries when watching nature programmes on TV. He laughs. "When you become a father it



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opens up that thing inside you where you become emotionally available more quickly”, he says. “I believe you’re a bit more emotionally vulnerable and this love is really overpowering inside you. It puts things into perspective. The boys know what I do but they are not impressed.”

Last year, Murphy directed the music video of *Hold Me Forever* by Money: a clever and engaging piece of cinematography. “I rented a van and picked up the gear from Panavision and pulled in all these favours from cameramen and lighting guys”, he says. “We did it in a day. It’s only five minutes or so but it was a lovely thing to do. It was non-narrative, an impressionistic thing where I put images to music. That’s the thing isn’t it? Music moves you. Unlike theatre, where because it is words, people need answers, they want to know what it’s about. Whereas you can just sit down and be moved by a piece of music and you don’t need to intellectualise the why. You just let it flow over you.”

He says that an actor is expected to be “so much more: an ambassador, a role model, even a model. I find that strange”, he says. “I act and that’s the public side of what I do. All the other stuff I’d like to retain for myself. I don’t want to expand on the personal in any way, mostly for the reason that I’m s**t at it. Not for any other reason, really. There are actors and musicians who are just good at that, working a room, but that is not really my thing. It’s not to say that I’m not opinionated or that I don’t have any political views. I do. But I don’t feel the need to use the media as a platform to shout them out loud. That’s not my thing. Judge me on the work, that’s all I can say.”

Ballyturk by Enda Walsh is at the Black Box Theatre, Galway until July 27; the Olympia Theatre, Dublin, from August 7 to August 23; and the Cork Opera House, Cork, from August 26 to August 30

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