

Allen, Dave

by Patrick Maume

Allen, Dave (1936–2005), comedian, was born David Edward Tynan O'Mahony on 6 July 1936 in a nursing home at 37 Lower Leeson Street, Dublin, youngest of three sons of (Gerard John) Cullen Tynan O'Mahony (nicknamed 'Pussy'), journalist, manager of the *Irish Times*, and raconteur, of 10 Merrion House, Lower Fitzwilliam Street, Dublin, and his wife Jean Ballantyne (née Archer), an English-born nurse. His paternal grandmother, Norah Tynan O'Mahony (qv), was the first women's features editor of the *Freeman's Journal*, and the poet Katharine Tynan (qv) was his great-aunt. Allen lost half a finger on his left hand in a childhood accident the circumstances of which he fantasticated in later reminiscences; his claim that his father had chopped it off while prankishly threatening him with an axe to dissuade him from picking his nose appears to be as much a figment as his suggestions that it had dissolved in alcohol, or that he was once so poor that 'when I wiped my arse one day my bum ate my finger it was so hungry' (Soutar, 219). Allen's half-finger became a favourite theme (and occasional prop) in his shows.

Allen's father was agnostic, though nominally catholic; his mother was a convert to Roman catholicism from anglicanism. After initially attending Beaumont convent school – run by Loreto nuns whom he recalled as 'the Gestapo in drag', with a particular talent for hitting or pinching pupils so as to cause maximum pain – Allen went to Firhouse national school, Co. Dublin, near the family residence outside Templeogue. For a period during the 1939–45 Emergency he lived with his mother and brothers at Keenagh, Co. Longford (1941–3), where they had gone for fear that Dublin might be targeted by air raids, and where Allen attended the local national school. On returning to Dublin, he went to Terenure College, run by the Carmelite fathers, whom Allen found no more appealing than the nuns. His reminiscences in later life often centred on memories of frequent and sadistic corporal punishment, and warnings from priests that adolescent male sexuality was a device of Satan leading straight to hell. Allen's resentment at these attempts 'to mess with my head when I was a child' was formative in his lifelong and outspoken atheism. (Not all such reminiscences should be taken at face value; Allen's biographer asserts that, though he recounted dormitories supervised by priests, he was never a boarder himself, and suggests he may have retold other boys' recollections as his own.)

Allen, who was close to his father, was severely affected emotionally by his death in 1948, after which his relations with the school deteriorated further. The discovery that Pussy's drinking and gambling had left the family heavily indebted meant that, notwithstanding assistance from journalistic friends, Allen's elder brothers were obliged to leave school and work as journalists to support the family. (Peter built a career on the *Irish Times*; John's attempts to move beyond the fringes of the British stage world were wrecked by indiscipline and alcoholism, and he died

derelict in January 1986.) Restless and even more discontented at school than previously, Allen often played truant to visit museums and art galleries (drawing and painting were favourite hobbies, and became a lifetime solace). Expelled from Terenure College, he briefly attended the Catholic University School (run by the Marist fathers), before leaving school aged 16. After working as a clerk on the *Irish Independent*, in 1954 he became a journalist on the *Drogheda Argus*, reporting weddings and gymkhanas. He later attributed this career path to the contemporary tradition of following a family profession.

Moving to London but failing to secure a job on a Fleet Street newspaper, he followed his brother John by becoming a 'redcoat' attendant at Butlin's holiday camps in Filey (Yorkshire), Skegness, Margate, and Brighton, performing various functions and telling jokes and stories during intervals between stage acts. In the winters he sold educational toys in Sheffield. Acquiring an agent, he became a professional comedian, adopting the stage name Dave Allen (allegedly because English audiences had difficulty pronouncing O'Mahony, though the new name also gave him top billing on alphabetically arranged posters). He initially worked the declining club and variety circuit, later claiming that he had toured with the last old-style nude tableaux show (recalling that the audience read newspapers while he performed). In 1959 he made his first television appearance, on the BBC talent show *New faces*, and realised that television was the medium of the future. He toured (1962–3) with pop singer Helen Shapiro, joined in the latter year by an emerging support band, the Beatles. At this period Allen modelled himself on American stand-up comedians such as Jerry Lewis, focusing his act around discrete gags leading up to a punchline.

Allen would later claim that he went to Australia at the recommendation of the famous nightclub entertainer Sophie Tucker, whom he supposedly supported on a tour of South Africa (1962/3). This story, however, appears to be a fiction: Tucker did not tour South Africa at the time, and Allen's biographer found no evidence that he ever appeared with her. It seems that he caught the attention of an Australian agent who saw him at a Beatles show. While performing in support of the singer Helen Traubel in Australian nightclubs, Allen often reminisced to her off stage about his early life. Traubel suggested that he should incorporate such material into his act. Such was the genesis of Allen's mature style of rambling absurdist monologues, which he described as influenced by the Irish storytelling tradition in general, and his father's stories in particular. After appearing in Melbourne and Sydney, Allen became the host of a ninety-minute chat show, *Tonight with Dave Allen*, on Sydney-based Channel 9; eighty-four episodes were recorded of what became one of Australian television's most successful programmes ever, its popularity boosted by the rumour (encouraged by Allen) that he was having an affair with singer Eartha Kitt, his hilarious interviews with eccentrics, and the frequent deployment of dangerous animals onstage.

He married in Australia (9 March 1964) the English actress Judith Stott, a divorcée with one son; they had two children, including the comedian Ed Allen (Edward James O'Mahony). After separating in 1980, the couple divorced in 1983. Returning to Britain in December 1964 to be with his wife, Allen established a reputation there through well-received performances as a compère at the televised *Sunday night at the London Palladium* (1967) and *The Blackpool show* (1966). After a slot as resident comedian on *The Val Doonican show* (1965–7), he obtained his first stand-alone show, *Tonight with Dave Allen* (1967), on ITV, a mixture of sketches with the monologues for which he became best known. Allen usually performed seated on a barstool, smoking a cigarette, and sipping from a presumed glass of whiskey (in fact ginger ale), while musing on the oddities of life, often expressing his suspicion of authority figures. (He famously gave up his trademark Gauloise cigarettes in 1981, commenting 'I was sick of paying people money to kill me.')

His signature farewell phrase was: 'Goodnight, and may your God go with you.'

On BBC television Allen headlined two programmes: *The Dave Allen show* (1968–9), and *Dave Allen at large* (1971–9); for the latter he gathered a group of supporting players and collaborators. Allen wrote much of his own material, compulsively scouring newspapers for items that he could work into his act. He resisted suggestions that he should move to an early evening slot, as this would have entailed restrictions on his material. In the 1970s and 1980s he toured widely (in Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and the USA) with a one-man stage show, 'An evening with Dave Allen', containing more 'adult' material than would then have been allowed on television; his stage performances were less-well-received in the USA than elsewhere.

Allen's treatment of sex and religion involved him in frequent controversies. Priests and the confessional ('talking to God's middle-man, a ninety-five-year-old bigot' (Soutar, 58)) were frequent targets; in 1975 he provoked widespread protests from Catholics over a sketch in which the pope (played by Allen himself) and his cardinals performed a striptease on the steps of St Peter's basilica. In 1977 Allen's shows were banned from RTÉ (though while touring Ireland in October 1979 he appeared on the *Late late show*, immediately after the visit to Ireland of Pope John Paul II). In 1984 the British anti-indecency campaigner Mary Whitehouse formally complained about his televised act, with particular reference to a simulated post-coital conversation. As with many stage comedians, Allen's angry and outspoken stage persona contrasted with a reserved offstage life; he kept his stage persona distinct from his private life, and did not allow his children to attend his shows.

Allen gave occasional straight performances, notably in Edna O'Brien's plays 'A pagan place' (1972) and 'Flesh and blood' (1985); in the dual roles of Captain Hook and Mr Darling in a production of 'Peter Pan' (1973); and in Alan Bennett's television play 'One fine day' (1979). He had a supporting role in the Australian comedy film *Squeeze a flower* (1970). He also presented several documentaries, notably *Dave Allen in the melting pot* (1969); surveying life in New York city, he discussed racism

and drug addiction, and conducted one of the first television interviews with openly homosexual men. Other documentaries for ITV included *Dave Allen in search of the great English eccentric* (1974), and *Dave Allen* (1978), which dealt with American eccentrics. Long fascinated with ghost stories, he published an anthology of horror stories, *A little night reading* (1974).

In the 1980s Allen was regarded by many fans of the new, politically engaged 'alternative comedians' as old-fashioned; his leisurely style contrasted with their quick-fire delivery, and some of his references to the Irish and other ethnic groups were seen as demeaning. (Allen defended himself against the latter charge by arguing that, whereas genuinely racist comics aimed to make their audiences feel superior to the targeted ethnic group, he portrayed such groups as all engaged in a general human absurdity.) He made a partial television comeback with a six-part BBC1 series, *Dave Allen* (1990), using considerably more outspoken material than he had previously deployed on television. Questions were asked in parliament after an Allen monologue about how people lived their lives by the clock, concluded with: 'And then we retire. And what do they give us? A fucking clock.'

In 1993 Allen appeared in a six-part series for the new ITV London franchise, Carlton. Thereafter he moved into semi-retirement, partly because of health problems, while continuing to make guest television appearances. At the British Comedy Awards he was named best comedy performer (1993), and was granted a lifetime achievement award (1996). He occasionally released videos of older material 'to keep myself in the style to which I had become accustomed – a bit of an Irish retirement, actually'. He maintained tight editorial control over his recordings, having been annoyed when his first television shows were chopped and changed when re-broadcast by American networks; they were released on DVD after his death. He presented a six-part BBC series based on his old material, *The unique Dave Allen* (1998). After giving his last performance on BBC Radio 4 in 1999, he retired and devoted himself to his hobby as an amateur painter.

After a seventeen-year relationship, Allen married secondly (9 December 2003) Karin Stark, a theatrical producer. Their one son was born three weeks after Allen's death from emphysema on 10 March 2005 in Kensington, London. A selection of his routines, edited by Graham McCann, was published as *The essential Dave Allen* (2005). Allen's obituarists saw him as prefiguring the aggressive mocking of authority by the alternative comedians who had once criticised him, and as paving the way for such irreverent and anti-deferential satire of political and religious authority as *Not the nine o'clock news* and *Father Ted*. The widespread use of the monologue by Irish dramatists such as Conor McPherson in the first decade of the twenty-first century also owes something to his influence.

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GRO (birth cert.); 'Obituary: Dave Allen', BBC News, 11 Mar. 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/4340343.stm>; *Times*, 11 March 2005; *Daily Telegraph*, *Guardian*, *Independent* (London), *Ir. Times*, 12 March 2005; Carolyn Soutar, *Dave Allen: the biography* (2005); ODNB online, [www.oxforddnb.com](http://www.oxforddnb.com); 'TV greats: Dave Allen', Television Heaven, [www.televisionheaven.co.uk/daveallen.htm](http://www.televisionheaven.co.uk/daveallen.htm) (websites accessed October 2010)

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