

Boyce, James

by Linde Lunney

Boyce, James (1909–66), actor and broadcaster, was born on 17 March 1909 in Belfast, the oldest of three sons of Hugh Boyce, a coachbuilder, and his wife Ellen (née Hayes), a dressmaker before marriage. The family, who were Christian Brethren in religion, lived in Rosebury Road, Ormeau. James was a pupil in Royal Belfast Academical Institution, and was awarded a Musgrave travelling scholarship, which enabled him to spend a summer in France, improving his language skills. Even years later, his hostess in La Vendée told John Oliver (qv) how impressed she had been by young Boyce's mimicry and conversational skills.

Awarded an entrance scholarship to Queen's University Belfast in July 1927, Boyce studied French and Spanish. On graduating, he returned to his old school as a language teacher, but his heart was much more in the amateur dramatics with which he had been involved since student days. At a time when amateur drama was flourishing everywhere, Boyce appeared in a variety of plays with several groups in Belfast, and got to know anyone who was anyone in theatre locally. He was a founder member of the Ulster Group Theatre in 1940. It became the most important Belfast company of the 1950s and 1960s, presenting international plays as well as sponsoring the work of emerging Irish writers, including Joseph Tomelty (qv) and Brian Friel (1929–2015).

In May 1959 Boyce and another actor refused roles in a Group Theatre production in protest at the theatre's recent rejection of 'Over the bridge' by Sam Thompson (qv), because of its unflinching treatment of sectarian and political themes. Boyce played a small part in the eventual premiere of Thompson's play (January 1960), which was staged in Belfast's Empire theatre.

From the start of his career, Boyce had roles in radio plays, some directed by Harold Goldblatt (qv), and in radio productions by George Shiels (qv); he read his own stories on the radio in 1939. His voice became very familiar to Ulster audiences. For many years from 1947 he was a panellist on the nationally popular BBC Light Programme series *Round Britain quiz*. In programmes such as *Speaking likenesses* in the 1950s he interviewed locally notable personages, such as Denis Rebbeck (qv).

With his theatrical experience, Boyce readily adapted to television, and made a number of programmes in the 1960s. *Our roving reporter* for the BBC (popular also when shown from the archives in 1994) and *The humour is on me now* (Ulster Television (UTV), 1965) made him a household name, like most local presenters at the time. He also took part in educational programmes, and seems to have given lectures in adult education at QUB.

Boyce eventually gave up his position in 'Inst' to become a freelance broadcaster, and was at the height of his career when, on 4 November 1966, aged 57, he dropped dead of a heart attack in the street on his way to work in UTV. He was survived by his wife, Dorothy Emma (née Douglas), from Bangor, Co. Down. They had married on 1 July 1936, and had one son and two daughters.

GRO (NI), birth, marriage certs.; *Belfast News Letter*, *passim*; *Northern Whig*, *passim*; *Ir. Independent*, 27 Jan. 1960; *The Stage and Television Today*, 10 Nov. 1966; Jonathan Bardon, *Beyond the studio: a history of BBC Northern Ireland* (2000), 203; John Oliver, *Come away with me* (2006), 41