

Linnane, Joe

by Terry Clavin

Linnane, Joe (1910–81), broadcaster and actor, was born 19 April 1910 in Marlborough Street, Dublin, the son of Thomas Linnane, who owned and ran a drapery in Marlborough Street, and his wife Johanna (Josephine) (née Lambe). The family subsequently moved to Sandymount Avenue, Dublin, and Joe attended Castleknock College, Dublin, before joining the accounting firm Finlay, Mulligan and Butler. He passed the preliminary exams of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in 1928, but his subsequent progress towards qualifying as an accountant was impeded by his success as a part-time actor. A member of the Bohemia Players, an amateur troupe, he first appeared in the Abbey Theatre with a four-line part in 1929, continuing for a time there in bit-part roles. By 1931 he was attracting notice as a highly promising actor in the Abbey School of Acting, and in May 1932 was awarded a gold medal by Hilton Edwards (qv) at the Tailteann games.

That year he joined the Abbey Second Company, and enjoyed his first big success in 1933 in the popular comedy 'Drama at Inish', which the Abbey took to London. Never a top-of-the-bill attraction, he made a name for himself with scene-stealing comic cameos, though his loud, quick-fire diction could grate on audiences in serious roles. Remaining with the Abbey until 1942, he developed into a more rounded actor, his subtle performance as a jockey in 'Strange guest' by Francis Stuart (qv) being described as 'not an easy feat for a player whose personality is such that it seems to reach out and shake hands with every member of the audience' (*Irish Monthly*, February 1941). In 1937 and again in 1938 he toured America with the Abbey, putting his financial skills to use by becoming the company's manager during the 1937 tour. While performing in 'The plough and the stars' by Sean O'Casey (qv), he met his future wife, Joan Plunkett, an Abbey actress. They married in Dublin in 1943 and had two daughters.

From 1935 he participated in radio plays on Radio Éireann (RÉ), progressing to compèring music shows in which he also crooned and played the piano. In 1941 he was made quiz master of RÉ's most popular show, *Question time*, which he soon took out of its Dublin studio to locales across the country. Here he honed a slick, irreverent and yet authoritative broadcasting method that transcended the pedestrian format to create a communal listening experience comparable to the fabled Gaelic games commentaries of Michael O'Hehir (qv). Linnane's wit, unflinching joviality and capacity for laughing with and not at contestants made certain potentially irritating traits, such as his garrulousness and mimicry, integral to the show's charm. So too was his enthusiasm for leading ragged singsongs in a rowdy baritone while mostly either forgetting or missing the notes on decrepit parish-hall pianos. He also tactfully handled his contestants' often inept or eccentric responses. Most infamously, a 1942 visit to Belfast caused a political furore when a competitor was asked to name a

famous author of fairy tales and drew warm applause from the nationalist audience by answering 'Winston Churchill'. The incident was raised in the house of commons, and RÉ was not allowed across the border for a considerable period.

From November 1941 Linnane performed as Mickser Mulligan alongside Jimmy O'Dea (qv) and Maureen Potter (qv) for BBC Radio in *Irish half hour*, a light entertainment show aimed at Irish workers in Britain and Irish servicemen in the British armed forces. It was a success, and ran under various titles until 1948. Leaving accountancy to become a full-time entertainer, Linnane established himself in the BBC, hosting various shows and being best known to British listeners for singing light songs in *Intimate interludes*. He had flats in Dublin and London, and juggled work with RÉ and the BBC for a time before focusing on the BBC in 1946.

His BBC career flowered that year when he hosted *The breakfast club* and defied an unpromising broadcast hour to deliver impressive ratings. He was soon also in charge of *It's my opinion*, in which the format of inviting members of the public to express their views on topical issues was well suited to his talents. Thereafter, he showcased his versatility in a variety of light entertainment formats, and by the early 1950s was presenting a peak listening time programme, *The star show*. Skilled at coaxing entertainment from participants, he was perhaps a touch over-excitable for English audiences and too ready to play the stage Irishman. During 1946–54 he appeared in minor roles in a succession of British movies, most notably *Captain Boycott* (1947) and an uncredited role in the Alfred Hitchcock-directed *Stage fright* (1950). More sporadically, he also acted on the stage and on BBC television.

In October 1953 RÉ lured him back to present *Question time* on terms making him the station's highest-paid employee per hour. He continued with the BBC for another year before committing himself to RÉ and to Dublin, where he lived in Greenfield Park, Donnybrook. Gliding seamlessly into his old role, he presented *Question time* until its demise in the late 1960s, while also hosting various other shows and reading commercials. In the mid 1950s, he commentated on Irish rugby internationals, having previously commentated on ice hockey and motorcycle racing for BBC Television. His rugby commentaries were popular, although some aficionados were unimpressed by his verbal extravagance and use of novel technical phrases such as 'prop forward' and 'rucking'.

Benefiting from a lucrative RÉ contract, he stopped acting from the mid 1950s, preferring to spend time with his family and attending to his single-figure golf handicap. A member of Milltown Golf Club, he played in the Barton Cup and won the captain's prize in the Stage Golfing Society. Comfortably RÉ's most accomplished and popular broadcaster, he influenced a younger generation of broadcasters, most notably Gay Byrne (b. 1934), who substantially modelled his on-air persona on Linnane's. Byrne often worked as Linnane's producer, and was particularly proud of a radio documentary he produced on the closure of the Howth tramline in 1959 in which Linnane broke with convention by improvising his monologue. From 1967

Linnane hosted RTÉ radio's first popular arts show where he deployed his deft interviewing technique on show business celebrities.

Following the advent of Telefís Éireann in 1962, he presented a number of television shows including *Pick of the post* and the *Joe Linnane show*, the latter a popular quiz-cum-talent show that toured the country. He preferred radio work to television, not least because radio less cruelly exposed the national broadcaster's limited budget. In the 1970s he hosted one of RTÉ radio's first 'drive time' shows and music shows aimed at older audiences. During a *Late late show* television special devoted to him in 1978, he was presented with the Actor's Equity award for distinguished service to show business. He continued to present shows up to his death in St Vincent's Hospital, Dublin, on 28 September 1981. He was buried in Dean's Grange, Dublin, and his will disposed of £77,368.

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GRO (birth cert.); *Ir. Independent*, 5 Mar. 1928; 2 May 1932; 23 May 1941; 1 Apr. 1948; 4 Oct. 1952; 17 Oct. 1953; 10 Oct. 1964; 29 Sept. 1981; 3 Apr. 1982; *Ir. Times*, 26 June 1931; 1 Nov. 1941; 5 July 1943; 5 Jan. 1944; 14 Nov. 1946; 27 Mar., 19 Sept., 10, 15, 17 Oct. 1953; 20 Feb. 1954; 27 Jan. 1955; 11 Jan. 1957; 11 Oct. 1958; 21 May 1959; 12 Feb. 1976; 29 Sept., 6 Oct. 1981; *Ir. Press*, 16 July 1937; 23 Oct. 1965; 29 Sept. 1981; 'Review: Strange guests, familiar host', *Irish Monthly*, lxxix, no. 812 (Feb. 1941), 6–9; *Radio Review*, 31 Jan. 1947; *Sunday Independent*, 31 Jan. 1954; 20 Oct. 1963; 14 Mar. 1976; 23 Sept. 1979; Maurice Gorham, *Forty years of Irish broadcasting* (1967); Robert Hogan and Michael J. O'Neill (ed.), *Joseph Holloway's Irish theatre* (1968–70), ii, 38; iii, 33, 58; Gay Byrne, *The time of my life* (1989); Philip B. Ryan, *Jimmy O'Dea: the pride of the Coombe* (1990); Brendan Balfe, *Radio man* (2007)