

MacGowran, Jack

by Bridget Hourican

MacGowran, Jack (1918–73), actor, was born 13 October 1918 in Ranelagh, Dublin, the only son among three children of Matthew MacGowran, a sporadically employed travelling salesman, and Gertrude MacGowran (née Shanahan). ‘Jackie’, as he was always known, was educated at the CBS in Synge St., where he excelled in athletics. On leaving school he joined the Hibernian Insurance Co. His stage debut was in November 1940 at the Gaiety Theatre in the chorus line of a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta for the amateur Rathmines and Rathgar Musical Society. In 1943 the playwright Brendan Smith (qv) gave him the lead in his play ‘Are you invited’ at the Peacock, and thereafter began writing comedy parts especially for him, only to find the critics rating the acting above the writing.

By 1947 MacGowran was confident enough to leave Hibernian Insurance to work full time at the Abbey. He did not prosper. His appearance was unheroic: he was frail, undernourished, and birdlike with an enormous nose, and this hindered his landing leading roles. However, his physique in all its peculiarity was intensely expressive; the London *Evening Standard* (24 Jan. 1949) called him ‘an Irish droll who given the opportunity would make Chaplin a fading memory’. MacGowran tried to create this opportunity, going in 1950 to Paris to study at the Theatre de L’Athenée with Etienne Decroux, who later taught Marcel Marceau.

On his return he went to the Abbey director, Ernest Blythe (qv), demanding better roles; Blythe allegedly replied: ‘Your nose is too big, and besides there aren’t many parts for Indian pedlars’ (Jordan Young, 37). MacGowran left the company. He was briefly with the Radio Éireann Repertory Company and from 1951 with the Gate, where Hilton Edwards (qv) admitted similar difficulties in casting him, though he did star him as the Dauphin opposite the Joan of Siobhán McKenna (qv) in the 1953 production of ‘Saint Joan’ by G. B. Shaw (qv). MacGowran appeared as Feeney in the John Ford (qv) film *The quiet man* (1952), and had a directorial triumph in 1953 with ‘The playboy of the western world’, starring McKenna, but the following year, at the age of 36 with a lack-lustre career and still living with his parents, he decided to leave for London and was never again to live in Ireland.

He had his London debut on 27 May 1954 as Young Covey in ‘The plough and the stars’ by Sean O’Casey (qv). He was working in a ketchup factory when offered the part of Harry Hopen in Eugene O’Neill’s ‘The iceman cometh’, which opened in January 1958. For this, he won the critics’ best supporting actor of the year award; the most influential critic of the age, Kenneth Tynan, noted: ‘Jack MacGowran, pinch-faced and baggy-trousered, plays the proprietor with a weasel brilliance I have not seen since the heyday of F. J. McCormick [qv]’ (Tynan, 210). That summer MacGowran went to Hollywood for a part in Disney’s *Darby O’Gill and the*

*little people*. Disliking the shoot, he drank to excess, and after a run-in with Walt Disney was nearly fired. He returned to London in autumn to play Clov in the Royal Court's production of 'Endgame' by Samuel Beckett (qv), and the most important collaboration of his career began.

MacGowran had met Beckett in March 1957 after appearing in his radio play 'All that fall'. He was later to say: 'I was born when I met Sam Beckett. So I've had two existences on this sphere. In the attempt to run away from myself, I ran into myself' (Jordan Young, 19). MacGowran became one of Beckett's foremost interpreters and was instrumental in bringing about a more widespread understanding of his work. Vulnerable, depressive, and alcoholic, MacGowran communicated all Beckett's despair and sense of absurdity; an inspired mime and comic, he brought out all his humour. Beckett gave him significant sums from his royalties and, on MacGowran's admiring it, a Jack B. Yeats (qv) painting.

Their collaboration included the 1959 radio play 'Embers' and the 1961 BBC production of 'Waiting for Godot' which won MacGowran the British actor of the year award and had Louis MacNeice (qv) writing: 'MacGowran's tragic-comic face, a blend of Tenniel's Mad Hatter, Harpo Marx, and the less stupid peasants of Brueghel, is such a natural on screen that it is unfair to anyone he is playing with' (*New Statesman*, 7 July 1961). The following year he amalgamated different pieces from Beckett's novels and plays into a one-man show, 'End of day', which premiered at the Dublin Theatre Festival (5 October 1962). It got generally good reviews but the *Guardian* correspondent, Peter Lennon, a friend of Beckett, called it shambolic and claimed MacGowran had put it together without the playwright's permission, something no one else would have dared to do. Beckett, however, was indulgent of MacGowran and even helped him fine-tune the show, which reopened in London in 1965 as 'Beginning to end', played in New York in 1970, and won MacGowran the actor of the year award at the 1972 Dublin Theatre Festival. Beckett directed MacGowran, with Patrick Magee, in a celebrated production of 'Endgame' in Paris in 1964, and wrote a television play, 'Eh Joe' (1966), specially for him. It was the only one of his performances with which MacGowran was satisfied.

MacGowran's career prospered on other levels and his personal life improved. He brought his drinking under control after being given five months to live by a doctor in 1960. On 21 March 1963 he married Gloria, youngest daughter of Sir Walter Nugent and a divorcee with two daughters; she had a third daughter by MacGowran in 1964. An appearance as the highwayman in Tony Richardson's celebrated 1963 film *Tom Jones* led to work with Roman Polanski, who proved another writer/director with whom MacGowran was in symbiosis. Polanski particularly admired him for his willingness to remain immersed in icy water for hours without complaint, and gave him the lead in the 1966 cult film *Dance of the vampires*. While making this he was simultaneously rehearsing Joxer Daly opposite Peter O'Toole's Captain Boyle in 'Juno and the Paycock', which opened in Dublin in August 1966 to rave reviews. MacGowran's American tour of 'Beginning to end' brought him a role in the 1972

horror classic, *The exorcist*. Following this he appeared in an American production of 'The plough and the stars', which opened in New York in January 1973.

On 26 January he was taken ill, and had to leave the play and be confined to the Algonquin Hotel, where he died on 30 January 1973. Beckett's letters to MacGowran are in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre in the University of Texas, Austin.

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*Evening Press*, 25 July 1964; *New York Times*, 6 Dec. 1970; *Times*, *Ir. Times*, 31 Jan. 1973; Kenneth Tynan, *A view of the English stage* (1975); Martin Esslin, *Mediations: essays on Brecht, Beckett and the media* (1980); Jordan Young, *The Beckett actor* (1988) (photos); Peter Lennon, *Foreign correspondent* (1994); Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett* (1997)

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