

MacLiammóir, Micheál

by Christopher Fitz-Simon

MacLiammóir, Micheál (Alfred Lee Willmore) (1899–1978), actor, stage and costume designer, and author, was born 25 October 1899 at 150 Purves Road, Willesden, London NW10, only son and youngest of five children of Alfred Willmore, a forage buyer for the firm of Whitney's of Bayswater, and his wife, Mary Willmore (née Lee). The families of both his parents were from London. He took the stage name of Micheál MacLiammóir while working in Ireland during the first world war, the surname being a Gaelicised version of Willmore and the first name a reference to the part of Michael in J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* which he had played as a child. He claimed in his highly fanciful autobiography, *All for Hecuba* (1946), that he was born in Cork and emigrated to Britain with his family at an early age, but this was a fabrication. He received his early education at the local board school in London and attended the children's theatre academy run by Emma Field; his sister Marjorie took charge of his education when he became a professional actor at the age of twelve; she was his chaperone on several tours which included visits to Dublin, Belfast, and Cork.

His first public stage appearances were in Emma Field's 'The goldfish and The fly-away land' in 1911, in which he toured London and suburban venues for £2 per week. Later the same year he was cast by Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree as Macduff's son in *Macbeth* at His Majesty's Theatre, London. He was Michael in Dion Boucicault jnr's annual Christmas revival of 'Peter Pan' at the Duke of York's, extended by a four-month spring tour of the provinces and Ireland, a pattern repeated annually until 1914, by which time he had outgrown child roles. During the summer and autumn of 1912 he was engaged by Tree for Charles Dickens's 'Oliver Twist', the first boy actor in the title part; thousands of postcard photographs were issued of this appealing young player. Tree cast him as Benjamin in a revival of 'Joseph and his brethren' by Louis Napoleon Parker in the summer of 1913. He also appeared in juvenile roles in at least four films, now lost.

Adept at pencil and water-colour sketching, he entered Kilburn Polytechnic at the age of fifteen to study art. His work was much influenced by Leon Bakst's sets for the visiting Russian Ballet. In 1915 he was admitted to the Slade School of Art at University College London, where an admirer, Geoffrey Rooke-Leigh, paid for his tuition; Rooke-Leigh also introduced him to the writing of W. B. Yeats (qv). With a fellow student, Mary O'Keefe, he attended Irish language classes at the Ludgate Circus branch of the Gaelic League, and it is likely that they saw plays by Yeats, Lady Gregory (qv), J. M. Synge (qv), and others during the visits of the Abbey Theatre at this period. Both students developed a passionate interest in the Celtic revival. In March 1917 he accompanied Mary O'Keefe and her mother to Ireland, the former having been prescribed 'fresh air' for a tubercular condition, the latter wishing

to escape the Zeppelins. It may be inferred that he was averting the imminent army call-up. Mrs O'Keefe took a cottage at Howth, Co. Dublin. He sustained a frugal existence by freelance newspaper and book illustration (he illustrated stories by Daniel Corkery (qv) (1878–1964) and Pádraic Ó Conaire (qv) among others) and occasional film and stage acting, including 'Blight' (1917) by Oliver St John Gogarty (qv) at the Abbey Theatre. More importantly, he made useful connections in the Dublin theatre and art world. He continued to live with the O'Keefes when they moved to and fro between Switzerland and the French riviera, and exhibited successfully in local galleries and also (in 1923) at the Leigh Gallery in London. Mary died in 1927 and MacLiammóir, as he was now known, returned to the theatre, joining the touring company of Anew McMaster (qv), to whom his sister Marjorie was now married.

He met Hilton Edwards (qv) on McMaster's spring tour of Ireland in 1927. They became lifelong companions. With Edwards he founded the Dublin Gate Theatre Studio which became the Gate Theatre in 1930, situated in the former assembly rooms of the Rotunda Hospital. It soon ran into financial difficulties and was saved only when Edward Pakenham (qv), 5th earl of Longford, bought up the company's remaining shares in December 1930. This was the beginning of a fruitful if not always easy collaboration which lasted for six years between the Longfords (Edward and his wife, Christine Pakenham (qv)) and MacLiammóir and Edwards. At the same period MacLiammóir received part-time employment as producer and designer for the new Irish-language theatre, Taibhdhearc na Gallaimhe, working closely with An t-Ollamh Liam O'Bríain (qv), who provided translations of several English and European plays. He wrote, designed, and directed the first production on the Taibhdhearc stage, 'Diarmuid agus Gráinne' (1928), an eclectic mythological piece, curiously influenced by both W. B. Yeats and J. M. Barrie. His imaginative set and costume designs – visual interpretations rather than naturalistic representations of the text – were partly responsible for the early success of the Gate, where he designed all of the productions until 1938, after which Molly McEwen, and later others, shared the assignments. In all he designed almost 200 productions, his last being Brian Friel's 'Crystal and Fox' at the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin, in 1968.

As an actor he excelled in romantic and introspective roles, especially those that called for the projection of a vibrant personality. He did not do so well in parts that required surface or naturalistic playing. The only film part in which he gave a significantly vivid performance was Iago in 'Othello' (1950), under the firm direction of Orson Welles, a lifelong friend. Among his most successful stage interpretations were Hamlet, Richard II, the Robert Emmet (qv) figure in 'The old lady says "No!"' by Denis Johnston (qv), the lead in Pirandello's 'Henry IV', Larry Doyle in 'John Bull's other island' by George Bernard Shaw (qv), Heathcliffe in the adaptation by Ria Mooney (qv) of 'Wuthering Heights', Lord Henry Wotton in his own dramatisation of 'The picture of Dorian Gray' by Oscar Wilde (qv), Oswald in Ibsen's 'Ghosts', and a number of winsome young men such as Danny in Emlyn Williams's 'Night must fall', and Martin in his own play 'Where stars walk' (first performed at the Gaiety,

1940). All these roles were repeated many times in Ireland and abroad. In 1960 he appeared at the Gaiety Theatre in his solo show on the life of Oscar Wilde, 'The importance of being Oscar', which he wrote himself and which brought him to the West End and Broadway and subsequently to more than a hundred cities worldwide between 1961 and 1975. His second one-person show, 'I must be talking to my friends' (Gaiety, 1963), a programme of dramatised literary and theatrical reminiscence, was almost as successful internationally, often playing on alternate nights with 'Oscar'. With 'Talking about Yeats' (1965), which was more like a lecture, with profuse verbal illustration, he visited numerous university theatres worldwide.

His earliest book was *Oidhcheanta sidhe* (1922), children's stories which he illustrated himself. Other works in the Irish language were *Ceo meala lá seacha* (1952), prose poems, and *Aisteóirí fé dha sholas* (1956), a journal of a tour to Egypt and Malta translated in 1961 as *Each actor on his ass*. A historical study, *Theatre in Ireland* (1950), was published by the Department of External Affairs. *Put money in thy purse* (1952) followed the making of Welles's film of *Othello*. A roman-à-clef entitled *Enter a goldfish* (1977) added tantalising fictional and non-fictional glosses to his life story. And *An Oscar of no importance* (1968) recounted his journeys on five continents with his Oscar Wilde solo performance. His plays, many of them frequently revived and performed abroad, were (besides those already mentioned): 'Dancing shadow' (Gaiety, 1941); 'Ill met by moonlight' (Gaiety, 1946); 'Portrait of Miriam' (Gaiety, 1947); 'The mountains look different' (Gaiety, 1948); 'Home for Christmas' (Gate, 1950); 'A slipper for the moon' (Gate, 1954); 'The liar' (Gate, 1969); and 'Prelude in Kasbek Street' (Gate, 1973). He also adapted or translated works by Marcel Achard, Henri-René Lenormand, Charlotte Brontë, Liam O'Flaherty (qv), Pirandello, and Wilde.

MacLiammóir and Edwards were jointly created freemen of the city of Dublin in 1973, the first theatrical practitioners to be so honoured. MacLiammóir was awarded the Gregory medal for literature in Irish by the RIA. The degree of LLD (h.c.) was conferred on him by Dublin University in 1962. A bronze head by Marjorie Fitzgibbon is in the Gate Theatre. He died in Dublin on 5 March 1978, after a short illness. His papers are in the Dublin Gate Theatre Collection in the library of Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, USA.

Micheál MacLiammóir, *All for Hecuba* (1946); Peter Luke, *Enter certain players* (1978); Richard Pine (ed.), *All for Hecuba: an exhibition to mark the golden jubilee . . . of the . . . Dublin Gate Theatre* (1978) [exhibition catalogue]; Christopher Fitz-Simon, *The boys* (1994); Micheál MacLiammóir, *Selected plays*, ed. John Barrett (1998)

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