

Magee, Patrick

by Patrick Maume

Magee, Patrick (1924–82), actor, was born on 31 March 1924 in Edward Street, Armagh town, eldest of five children of Patrick McGee, schoolteacher and eventually principal of St Patrick's primary school. When he joined Actors' Equity he changed his surname to 'Magee' to avoid confusion with another actor. He was educated at St Patrick's Grammar School, Armagh, where he distinguished himself in school dramatic productions. He later drew on his south Ulster background in such projects as a 1960 BBC radio production of 'The Countess Cathleen' by W. B. Yeats (qv) (in which he played a demon merchant as Northern Irish), a recorded live performance in 1973 of the poem sequence *The rough field* by John Montague (1929–2016), and in readings for a BBC Radio 3 portrait of poet Patrick Kavanagh (qv), 'Dancing with Kitty Stobling' (1980).

After beginning his acting career as an amateur, Magee joined the Ulster Group Theatre of Harold Goldblatt (qv) in 1948. He was brought to London by Tyrone Guthrie (qv) in 1951 to appear in three Irish plays at the Lyric Hammersmith. Subsequently, he became a member of the travelling company of Anew McMaster (qv), appearing in provincial towns across Ireland. He later recalled as one of the great advantages of working with McMaster the versatility acquired by playing a wide range of roles at short notice. In this troupe he met the future playwright Harold Pinter (1930–2008), who became a lifelong friend (eventually delivering the eulogy at Magee's memorial service). It was in McMaster's troupe that Magee developed his distinctive stage manner. Through playing aristocratic villains in melodrama, he cultivated a low stage voice combining aristocratic overtones with a residual Irishness, suggesting both cruelty and debility. Premature baldness, with a great domed scalp and high forehead surrounded by an unkempt ring of grey hair, and piercing brown eyes, made him instantly recognisable. After a brief connection with Dublin's Gate Theatre, Magee returned to Britain, working in repertory theatre. At first he found it difficult to get parts, and was obliged to appear as Irish characters (often 'heavies') in individual episodes of TV serials and low-budget films.

Magee is especially remembered for his close association with Samuel Beckett (qv), which began after Beckett heard Magee reading *Molloy* and *From an abandoned work* on BBC Radio 3 (December 1957) and realised that the actor's voice resembled that which he heard in his own mind while writing. Beckett wrote the play *Krapp's last tape* (1958) for Magee, initially calling it 'the Magee monologue'. Magee established what became the dominant performance tradition of presenting Krapp as an austere, Beckett-like recluse (though his stage performance was more physically nimble than that of later interpreters). In subsequent years, Magee, Jack MacGowran (qv) and the English actress Billie Whitelaw (1932–2014) became known as 'the Beckett triplets' because of their close personal and professional

associations with the writer. Beckett's wife lamented that when MacGowran and Magee arrived in Paris her husband would join them in drinking sprees, and Anthony Cronin (1926–2016) recalled that Magee was one of the few people with whom Beckett discussed his personal life, while Beckett appreciated Magee's fond of macabre stories. Beckett personally directed 'my darlings Pat Magee and Jackie MacGowran' as Hamm and Clov in a 1964 Paris production of 'Endgame' subsidised by the Irish-American patron Victor Herbert. An observer at rehearsals noted Magee's instinctive grasp of the centrality of the words' delivery rather than any conscious emphasis on symbolism, and Magee's remarking in his 'throaty Armagh accent # "he [Beckett] means don't play it like symbols"' (Knowlson, 512–13). On a later occasion, Magee remarked: 'All that is necessary is to follow Sam's directions to the letter # but stray from these even an inch and you are at once in all kinds of trouble, up to the neck' (*Jr. Times*, 2 November 1976).

The many Beckett works that Magee recorded for BBC radio include extracts from the novel *The unnamable* in 1959, the radio play 'Embers' in the same year (with MacGowran; it won the Prix Italia), 'Words and music' in 1962 (playing Words, opposite Felix Felton's Croak), the prose work *Texts for nothing* in 1975, and 'Rough for radio II' in 1976 (with Pinter and Whitelaw). He appeared in 1972 as Krapp on BBC television. In 1976 he followed MacGowran in touring the world with a one-man Beckett show, 'An evening with Samuel Beckett', including such newly published material as *For to end yet again, and other fizzles*. (Beckett's refusal to allow performances in South Africa may have stimulated Magee's subsequent prominence in the campaign for an Actors' Equity boycott of the apartheid state, though he was in any case a man of strong left-wing views and sympathetic to Irish republicanism.) In the same year Beckett wrote the stage play 'That time' for Magee; some critics described it as a reprise of 'Krapp', and it was noted that at some performances Magee almost swayed out of the spotlight.

The Beckett connection facilitated wider recognition of Magee's talents as a stage actor. He premiered the part of the destructive father in Tom Murphy's 'A whistle in the dark' (1961) and appeared as Father Domineer in the 1959 Edinburgh production (later transferred to London) of 'Cock-a-doodle dandy' by Sean O'Casey (qv). He struck up a friendship with O'Casey, who lent him one of his own skullcaps to wear when playing Hamm in 'Endgame'. At Pinter's behest, he joined the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1964 to play the part of the sinister Irish gunman McCann in a London revival of Pinter's 'The birthday party'; Magee revived the role for the 1968 film version (dir. William Friedkin). In the English-language premiere of Peter Weiss's aggressively Brechtian play 'Marat/Sade' (London, 1964), Magee played the Marquis de Sade; he reprised the role on Broadway in 1966 (receiving a Tony award as best featured actor) and in the 1967 film adaptation (dir. Peter Brook). He appeared with Paul Scofield in Charles Dyer's play 'Staircase' (1966), seen as highly controversial because of its sympathetic portrayal of an ageing gay couple, and in several Eugene O'Neill productions (e.g., 'The iceman cometh' (1958) in London, and 'A touch of the poet' (1970) and 'A moon for the misbegotten' (1971) at the

Gardner Arts Centre, Brighton). He also became a stalwart of the BBC's influential television plays, including Brecht's 'The Caucasian chalk circle' (1975). His radio work (including a 1959 reading of poems of J. M. Synge (qv) as arranged by Patrick Galvin (qv), and playing Vladimir in the first BBC broadcast of Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot' in 1960) was praised by Dick Walsh (qv) as making him the 'most admirable of Irish voice actors' (*Ir. Times*, 27 February 1970).

Magee's filmography is dominated by horror movies. Many of these were hackwork undertaken to fund his stage career, as he lamented in correspondence with Beckett. (He always considered himself primarily a stage actor.) Conor Carvill, however, argues that Magee's connection to the horror genre at a time when film censorship was breaking down and older moral frameworks were being replaced by a new emphasis on nihilism and uncontrollable darkness has affinities to his wider body of work. In the early 1960s he appeared in several films by the exploitation producer-director Roger Corman, notably *Dementia 13* (1963; directed by the apprentice Francis Ford Coppola) and *The masque of the red death* (1964; dir. Corman), which starred Vincent Price and has achieved lasting cult status, Magee having an unusually prominent supporting role as a debauched aristocrat burnt alive by a dwarf whom he mistreated. He often played mad scientists or religious fanatics (the parliamentarian chaplain Hugh Peters in *Cromwell* (1970; dir. Ken Hughes); a fundamentalist cult leader in *The fiend* (1972; dir. Robert Hartford-Davis); a psychiatrist icily indifferent to ethics in *Demons of the mind* (1972; dir. Peter Sykes)). He also worked for the European art-exploitation directors Lucio Fulci (the lead in the Poe adaptation *The black cat* (1981)) and Walerian Borowczyk (one among several embodiments of Victorian hypocrisy in the quasi-pornographic *Blood of Dr Jekyll* (1981)).

Significant non-horror roles included the vengeful writer Frank Alexander in Stanley Kubrick's *A clockwork orange* (1971) and the Chevalier de Balibari in the same director's *Barry Lyndon* (1975); in the latter, Magee was reduced to collapse by Kubrick's perfectionist insistence on repeating a scene in which Balibari throws dice at a gaming table. Magee had a cameo in *The servant* (1963; dir. Joseph Losey, scripted by Pinter) as an overbearing Irish bishop dining in a restaurant with an obsequious priest, having appeared in an earlier Losey film, the prison drama *The criminal* (1960). He played Cornwall in Peter Brook's 1971 film of *King Lear* (with MacGowran as the Fool).

Magee married (1958) Belle Sherry (also from Armagh); they had a twin son and daughter, born in 1961. Not inclined to domesticity, Magee was a heavy drinker and compulsive gambler, who described himself in a 1976 interview as 'a street fighter from Armagh' who 'chose to live on a precipice' (*Evening Herald*, 16 August 1982). For most of his London career he lived in a bed and breakfast establishment on West Cromwell Road; some commentators describe it as 'seedy', but Anthony Cronin recalled it as relatively comfortable and upmarket, with a motherly landlady

fond of Magee but concerned by the wide variety of women he brought back with him.

From the late 1970s, Magee found it harder to contain his drinking. In 1976 he was sacked from a Royal Court Theatre production of 'Endgame' for appearing drunk on stage while playing Hamm. Beckett came to the rescue by arranging for Magee to read *For to end yet again* on the BBC, commenting that the reading should take place 'in a sober moment if possible'. In March 1981 Magee played Frank Hardy in the London premiere of 'Faith healer' by Brian Friel (1929–2015); Friel believed that Magee's rather sinister air made him the ideal interpreter of the part. The playwright Thomas Kilroy recalled that Magee was visibly and terrifyingly drunk on stage, but when he spoke he perfectly captured Hardy's self-destructive sense of fragility, simultaneously powerful and impostorous. Critics tactfully described Magee as 'inaudible', and he was removed after half a dozen performances as he was at constant risk of falling off the stage. In 1982 he recorded his last BBC Beckett reading, of the short novel *Ill seen ill said*; it was broadcast posthumously.

Patrick Magee died of a heart attack in his London flat on 14 August 1982. In July 2017 a plaque was unveiled at his birthplace in Armagh. It was announced that a biography by Conor Carvill was in preparation, drawing on sources such as correspondence in the Pinter archive in the British Library, the Beckett papers at TCD and the University of Reading, and the BBC archives.

---

*Ir. Press*, 28 Nov. 1957; *Ir. Times*, 6 June, 30 Dec. 1958; 8 Jan., 25 Mar., 19 Sept., 21 Nov. 1959; 17 Mar., 14 Apr. 1960; 1 May, 7, 13 Sept. 1961; 18 Feb., 29 Aug. 1964; 1 June 1966; 29 Mar. 1969; 27 Feb. 1970; 13 Nov. 1972; 12 Mar., 16, 24 May, 7 July, 8 Sept. 1973; 19, 30 Apr., 7 June, 6 Dec. 1975; 17 Mar., 19 Apr., 2 Nov. 1976; 3, 13 Mar., 17 Apr., 22 Dec. 1981; 24 Mar., 16 Aug., 9 Nov. 1982; 12 Apr., 4 Oct. 1986; 28 Jan., 24 Apr. 1999; 16 Mar. 2013; *Ir. Independent*, 23 July, 8 Oct., 5 Nov. 1960; 18 June 1966; 5 Dec. 1968; 27 Feb. 1969; *Sunday Independent*, 5 Mar. 1967; 13 Sept. 1970; 31 Jan. 1971; 1 Feb. 1976; 5 Nov. 1989; Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: a biography* (1978) (interviewees include Magee); *Evening Herald*, 16 Aug. 1982; James Knowlson, *Damned to fame: the life of Samuel Beckett* (1996); Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: the last modernist* (1996); C. J. Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski (ed.), *Faber companion to Samuel Beckett* (2004), 339; Colm Tóibín, 'My darlings: Samuel Beckett's Irish actors', *London Review of Books*, xxix, no. 7 (5 Apr. 2007), 3–8; *Belfast Telegraph*, 28 July 2017