

O'Connell, Deirdre

by Bridget Hourican

O'Connell, Deirdre (1939–2001), founder of the Focus Theatre, was born Eleanor O'Connell on 16 June 1939 in New York, USA, fourth among five children of Michael Joe O'Connell, worker in the Brooklyn navy yard and trade unionist, and his wife Nellie, daughter of Timothy Taaffe of Cork. Both parents were Irish nationalists: Michael Joe O'Connell, born in Sligo, was anti-treaty IRA and remained in touch with the republican movement after his emigration to America in 1928; his wife was a member of Cumann na mBan. Though all the children were born and reared in the Bronx, the family's Irish identity remained strong: three of the children settled in Dublin, and the parents eventually retired to Bray in 1972. Eleanor was educated at Public School 9, St Jerome's Parochial School on Alexander Avenue, and Cathedral High School, and though bright, was not studious. From a young age she revelled in performing and won prizes in singing and dancing in New York *feiseanna*. Aged 16, she produced, directed, and starred in her own show, 'Top hat', for her local parish, and the following year was accepted into Saul Colin's Dramatic Workshop, one of the leading centres of the acting method pioneered by Constantin Stanislavski. Eleanor made her first trip to Ireland aged 17, and in Dublin told Ursula White-Lennon, director of the Pocket Theatre, that she wanted to open a Stanislavski school in Dublin, but would first complete her training. Back in New York she supported herself through her training with odd jobs and singing in Greenwich Village cafés. While appearing (as 'Eleonora O'Connell') on off-Broadway productions, she was spotted by Lee Strasberg and invited to join his prestigious Actor's Studio, where Marilyn Monroe and Marlon Brando had trained. Broadway appearances in the plays of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams brought her acclaim; she had presence, talent, and striking Irish looks of red hair and pale skin. Her future was promising and her decision to give up a New York career to open a school in the then impoverished, unsophisticated Ireland seemed quixotic, but her drive to teach was stronger than her drive to perform and she regarded moving to Ireland as returning home. Renaming herself for a second but final time as 'Deirdre', she arrived in Dublin in 1961 and remained the rest of her life.

After resuming contact with Ursula White-Lennon, she initially used the Pocket Theatre in Ely Place to open her Stanislavski studio and put on her first show. In a choice that prefigured the Focus repertoire, it was avant-garde: an adaptation by Saul Colin of Herman Hesse's *Steppenwolf*. Immediately afterwards, the Pocket was sold for development and for the next few years the studio was run from temporary premises. In order to raise money Deirdre took singing engagements in London, commuting back to Dublin to train her actors and put on improvised shows. She also returned during summers to New York to join established repertory companies. While singing in O'Donoghue's in Baggot St., she met the ballad singer Luke Kelly (qv). He was, like her, creative, red-haired, and a socialist with Irish republican

leanings. They lived together in London and Dublin and on 21 June 1965 married in Dublin; O'Connell was persuaded to wear a white top to mitigate her customary black. They settled in Dartmouth Square, Ranelagh, and in 1967 O'Connell found a location for her theatre in an abandoned clothing factory at 6 Pembroke Place. Most of the £3,000 needed for rent and refurbishment came from Luke Kelly, and the firm Burke-Kennedy Architects helped turn the site into the seventy-three-seat Focus Theatre. (O'Connell numbered Declan and Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy among her students.) The debut was Doris Lessing's 'Play with a tiger', which opened in autumn 1967 to poor audiences. However, by May 1970 'Hedda Gabler' was running for twelve weeks.

Focus shows were invariably critically successful (Con Houlihan in the *Evening Press* and Mary Manning (qv) in *Hibernia* were stalwart champions) and audiences were often good, but the theatre never made any money. With a capacity of only seventy-three, takings were small and the theatre qualified only once (1977) for a miserly Arts Council grant: £4,000, about a tenth of the sum allocated to larger theatres. Fees for the studio were kept low: £1 a session in 1963 rose to £2 by 1982. The company could not afford to pay the rates demanded by Equity, the actors' union, so were limited to plays with small casts. The theatre survived through its loyal patrons, the Friends of Focus, who gave donations and attended every performance in order to support the only theatre in Dublin that was resolutely non-commercial and consistently performed new, foreign, and experimental plays. Chekhov, Ibsen, and Tennessee Williams were particular favourites; Irish plays were always by new authors.

The Focus was unique among small theatres in Dublin for its longevity: most followed the pattern of the Pocket and the Pike, a few dynamic years followed by closure. Focus's survival was due to O'Connell's dedication; she took almost no holidays and the theatre was her life, particularly after the breakup of her marriage to Kelly. Since she was an outstanding actress, she was offered roles in other Dublin theatres (including Blanche DuBois in 'A streetcar named Desire'), but turned them down to concentrate on the Focus. Although in later years she began to drink heavily, this did not prevent her putting on shows and teaching on an almost daily basis. In her invariable black – black skirt, tights, pumps, shawl – with her red hair piled high and clutching a clipboard, she was a familiar Dublin (or more specifically Leeson St.) sight. Her charm was effective in gaining patrons and favours. The *Irish Times* critic Eileen Battersby wrote: 'She combines the west-of-Ireland old-worldliness she inherited from her mother's Sligo relatives with the directness you can only really acquire in New York' (*Ir. Times*, 28 Nov. 1991). Brian de Salvo, who directed (1991) the successful 'A view from the bridge', said: 'Chaos attended every production I did at the Focus . . . magic attended the chaos. Deirdre's magic' (*Ir. Times*, 15 June 2001). Her students, who included Tom Hickey, Gabriel Byrne, and Johnny Murphy, described her as guide rather than teacher. On the occasion of Focus's thirty-year anniversary in November 1997, the former minister for arts, culture and the Gaeltacht, Michael D. Higgins, who was married to a former Focus

actress, Sabina Coyne, called O'Connell the greatest single influence in Irish theatre since the 1960s. However, some felt she combined too many roles – actor, teacher, director, producer. The drinking and the drive to keep the show on the road certainly took its toll on her health: she died suddenly of a heart attack at home in Dartmouth Square, on 10 June 2001, six days short of her sixty-second birthday. She was buried beside Luke Kelly at Glasnevin cemetery. Focus continued after her death under the directorship of Joe Devlin, with an increased grant from the Arts Council. Her papers are in the NLI.

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*Magill*, 21 Nov. 1982; *Sunday Independent*, 13 Oct. 1985; *Ir. Times*, 28 Nov. 1991, 25 July 1992, 15, 16 June 2001; Des Geraghty, *Luke Kelly* (1994); Geraldine O'Connell Cusack, *Children of the far-flung tide* (2003); private information