

Swift, Carolyn

by Gerard Whelan

Swift, Carolyn (1923–2002), writer, broadcaster, journalist, critic, actress, and theatre owner, was born Carol Samuel on 21 September 1923 in London, elder of two children of Capt. Cecil Samuel, businessman, and Enid Samuel (née Van den Bergh), both of Grosvenor Square, London W1. She was educated at Camden House School, London; Battle Abbey and Moira House Schools, Sussex; and Kerr-Sanders Secretarial College, London.

Carol Samuel was employed by the British Council in London from 1941 to 1946, latterly as secretary to the theatrical manager, Walter Humphreys. It was through Humphreys that she met the theatrical legend Anew McMaster (qv), whose offer of employment first brought her to Ireland (1947). While working for McMaster at the Gate Theatre in 1947 Samuel met director Alan Simpson (qv), then working as stage manager for Dublin Gate Theatre Productions, directed by Hilton Edwards (qv) and Micheál MacLiammóir (qv). She and Simpson married the same year. They would go on to have three daughters, Maureen (b. 1950), Gráinne Naomi (1952–78), and Deirdre Jessica Simpson (b. 1954). It was Alan Simpson who invented for Samuel the stage name Carolyn Swift, which she would use professionally until her death.

After a brief attempt to settle in London following their marriage, the couple returned to Dublin (1948) when Alan Simpson secured a captain's commission in the Irish army. Swift's first play, 'The millstone', was produced in Dún Laoghaire in 1951. In 1953 she and Simpson opened the tiny Pike Theatre in Dublin. The Pike soon established itself as the most important of Ireland's pocket theatres, with a string of both nationally and internationally acclaimed productions directed by Alan Simpson. Among the most notable of these were the world premiere of 'The quare fellow' by Brendan Behan (qv), the first unabridged English-language production of 'Waiting for Godot' by Samuel Beckett (qv) (the slightly earlier London production had been censored), and the first English-language production of Ionesco's 'The bald prima donna'.

By 1957 the Pike, having attracted increasing international attention, seemed poised for major success. But one of its most artistically successful productions – the 1957 European English-language premier of Tennessee Williams's 'The rose tattoo', produced for the first Dublin Theatre Festival – led to the extraordinary arrest of Alan Simpson for supposed indecency and to a year-long court case that became one of the most notorious yet mysterious censorship battles in Irish arts history. Eventually Simpson was completely exonerated, but the costs of the case fatally wounded the Pike, which eventually closed in 1961.

In 1961 Swift, by now separated from Alan Simpson, was invited by Hilton Edwards to join the nascent drama department of Telefís Éireann, and RTÉ became her main professional home for many years. She was centrally involved in the early days of the drama department, where (as well as writing many scripts) she was script editor (1961–4, 1967–70); but her most fondly remembered work at the station was for young people, through her central involvement with the much-loved ‘Wanderley Wagon’, for which (as well as being series editor) she wrote 100 scripts between 1969 and 1980.

Throughout the 1960s, '70s, and '80s Swift combined her editorial and script work for both TV and radio with a huge range of other writing for newspapers (she was, among other things, dance correspondent for the *Irish Times* from 1979 until a few months before her final illness), magazines, film, records (she was an accomplished lyricist), and stage. In 1976 Swift made the first of 145 broadcast contributions to RTÉ radio's popular ‘Sunday miscellany’, and she was, over some three decades, a regular contributor to many RTÉ arts programmes. She was a tireless promoter both of the arts themselves and of the welfare of their practitioners, and the organisations and institutions to which she belonged or in which she held office included the Abbey Theatre (coopted on to the board in 1986, and an elected board member 1988–94), Bórd Scannán na hÉireann (Irish Film Board), the Society of Irish Playwrights, the Irish Writers' Union (vice-president 1988/9), the Irish Writers' Centre (board member 1992), Irish Actors' Equity Association (founder member, trustee and executive 1968–75), the Irish Film and Television Guild, the National Union of Journalists, the Irish Writers' Union, and Children's Books Ireland.

In 1981, aged almost 60, Swift found yet another new career with the publication of her first work of fiction for children, *Robbers in the house* (The Children's Press), one of the first books to be published in what would become the flourishing native children's publishing industry. *Robbers* was the first of eighteen children's books Swift herself would write between 1981 and 1996. In 2000 two of these – *The secret city* (1991) and *The mystery of the mountain* (1992) – became the first Irish-produced children's books to have publishing rights sold to China.

In 1984 Swift published *Stage by stage*, a volume of autobiography covering her life up to the point at which she joined RTÉ, including the turbulent years at the Pike. A projected second volume was never completed. She was in declining health for the latter half of the 1990s. In remission from cancer, she spent the years 2000–02 researching, with Gerard Whelan, newly available church and state documents in the hope of finally discovering the truth behind the 1957 ‘Rose tattoo’ debacle, the single event that had effectively destroyed her first career in Ireland. The result of their research was published as the Whelan-written *Spiked: church–state intrigue and the Rose tattoo case* (New Island Books) in September 2002. Swift's preface to the book was the last piece of her writing to be published in her lifetime, and a moving interview about its contents on the Marion Finucane RTÉ radio show the final chapter in her long career in broadcasting. She had been extremely ill for some

months before the book's publication, and barely a week after its launch she died, at 2.15 a.m. on 16 November 2002, of cancer in Our Lady's Hospice, Harold's Cross, Dublin.

Much of Swift's work was done in the relatively ephemeral media of journalism and broadcasting, and no comprehensive listing of her work exists outside of her own records. These, however, comprise some ten single-spaced pages of radio, television, film, recording and stage work, scripts, adaptations, song credits, stories, talks, books and contributions to books, and even an unperformed opera. Such was the length and sheer variety of Carolyn Swift's career that in a sense it defies conventional classification. She was centrally involved in so many crucial artistic and social fields in Ireland over a period of five decades that her significance is ultimately probably more cultural than merely artistic. It was in many ways her misfortune that the events of the 1957 'Rose tattoo' case overshadowed in the public mind the range and importance of other, later achievements. Carolyn Swift was a feminist before her time, an author of almost twenty books who judged her own writing in terms of its usefulness rather than its literary merit, a genuine arts devotee who was also a politically active socialist and trade unionist, and an English-born Irish patriot of a decidedly pacifistic kind. She remained impossible to pigeonhole within conventionally accepted Irish contexts even as these contexts altered over the years, and it may well be that (as was certainly the case for a long time before her death) her importance to modern Irish culture will remain better appreciated outside Ireland than within it.

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Carolyn Swift, *Stage by stage* (1984); Gerard Whelan/ Carolyn Swift, *Spiked: church–state intrigue and the Rose tattoo case* (2002); Órlaith O'Callaghan, 'Theatre and the modern Irish state: a case study of the Pike Theatre Club' (MA thesis, NUI (UCC), 1995); personal papers of Carolyn Swift; personal knowledge