

Toal, Maureen

by Linde Lunney

Toal, Maureen (1930–2012), actress, was born Mary Toal on 7 September 1930 in a nursing home on the North Circular Road, Dublin, one of five children (two boys and three girls) of Thomas Toal, a clerk in Irish Shell, and his wife Mary (née Bates). The family lived in Kincora Park, Clontarf, Dublin. Maureen (as she was known from an early age) enjoyed taking part in plays and concerts in her national school, St John the Baptist, Clontarf, where a remarkable headmistress, Áine Cannon (qv), encouraged her. Her secondary school, the Dominican Scoil Chaitríona in Eccles Street, was less engaging, and Toal left after taking her intermediate certificate. Áine Cannon then asked Frank Dermody of the Abbey Theatre to audition her former pupil, and on 6 October 1946, Maureen, aged 16, started as a trainee actress earning £2 a week.

In a widely varied informal apprenticeship, she quickly gained experience, acting in Abbey classics as well as farces and Irish-language pantomime. In 1949 she appeared for the first time in London, in 'The king of Friday's men' by Michael Joseph Molloy (qv). Her first television appearance was on a well-reviewed 1951 BBC production of 'Juno and the paycock' by Sean O'Casey (qv). In June 1951 she married fellow actor Milo O'Shea (1926–2013), and the very next day, instead of taking a honeymoon, travelled with him in the Ronald Ibbs Company to tour in the United States. In the 1950s she and O'Shea appeared regularly on Radio Éireann in a programme of short sketches. They had a supportive working relationship, and also acted together in the Globe Theatre Company and with Orion Productions, founded in 1957 by their friend Phyllis Ryan (qv) (1920–2011).

Also involved with Orion was the actor Norman Rodway (qv); he and Toal starred in a springtime 1962 production at the Eblana Theatre of Tennessee Williams's 'Cat on a hot tin roof'. The intensity of their on-stage relationship hinted at their mutual attraction, and Milo O'Shea became aware that they were having an affair. In June of that year, Toal was found guilty of dangerous driving after drinking and for failing to stop after an accident. The affair with Rodway, a serial philanderer, was soon over, and the marriage with O'Shea lasted until December 1973, when a divorce was granted on the basis of irretrievable breakdown, and after the couple had lived apart for more than two years. They had adopted a son, who stayed with Toal after O'Shea moved to America.

Toal's career was less of a priority for her when her son was young, and she was happy to take undemanding parts in revues, pantomimes and variety shows. However, owing partly to enduring personal difficulties, she increasingly found the strength of character and emotional depth to play some of the strongest women characters in modern drama. The dramatist Frank McGuinness was profoundly

moved by her performance in Arthur Miller's 'All my sons' in 1981; he said it was a 'landmark performance ... the best I've ever seen' (*Guardian*, 4 April 2010). McGuinness went on to write two plays with Toal in mind, including *Baglady*, first performed in 1985 at Dublin's Peacock theatre, a solo monologue praised by David Nowlan (qv) for its 'heart-wrenching power ... [which] must move a stone to tears' (*Ir. Times*, 6 March 1985). Toal herself regarded it as a career highlight.

In a career lasting as long as Toal's, there were many highlights: performances in all Dublin and most provincial theatres, on Broadway, in films and on television, from romantic leads and glamour girls, to the Widow Quin of J. M. Synge (qv) and O'Casey heroines in Abbey and Gate productions, as well as challenging roles in contemporary American plays. In films, she appeared mostly in character roles of varying importance, notably in *Rooney* (1958; dir. George Pollock), *Only the wind* (1961; dir. Fritz Umgelter), *A guy called Caesar* (1962; dir. Frank Marshall), and *Ulysses* (1967; dir. Joseph Strick). She had a memorable comic part in 1984 as an eccentric cook in an episode of the successful Channel 4 television series *The Irish RM*, and audiences and critics welcomed her versatile performances in the plays of Brian Friel, Hugh Leonard (qv), John B. Keane (qv) and many others, including premieres of several plays that became standards in the repertoire. For better or for worse, Toal achieved her greatest celebrity in the popular RTÉ rural soap opera *Glenroe* (1992–2001), as the forceful publican, Teasy McDaid, a central character in many of the show's plotlines.

In 1980 she won the inaugural Irish Theatre Award for best performance by an actress, and was awarded the Harveys of Bristol best actress award in 1982 for her performance in 'All my sons'. She was the subject of several television documentaries, and in 2010 was awarded an honorary doctorate in literature by UCD; delivering the citation, Frank McGuinness described her as 'our greatest actress', noting: 'Hers is the look out of which were fashioned the masks of comedy and tragedy' (*Ir. Times*, 25 August 2012).

Toal met the noted actor, writer and Irish-language broadcaster Eoin Ó Súilleabháin, son of Muiris Ó Súilleabháin (qv), in RTÉ in the 1960s; they lived together following her divorce. In 1976 Ó Súilleabháin suffered a sudden, massive brain haemorrhage, and lay in a coma for three months. Toal was given little hope that he would ever recover. She and the medical team worked together to rehabilitate him, and he more or less regained his health; they had thirteen years together afterwards, but he was increasingly ill, requiring Toal's care, especially in the last few months, when his deteriorating condition robbed him of speech and she was the only person who could communicate with him. At the end of July 1989, only six weeks after the death of her mother, Toal attended the private funeral of her partner to Shanganagh cemetery, but told none of her colleagues until after she had fulfilled the week's performances in Keane's 'Big Maggie'. Maureen Toal herself died in her sleep at home in Sandycove, Co. Dublin, on 24 August 2012, and was buried in Mount Jerome cemetery.

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GRO (birth cert.); Patrick O'Connor, 'Theatre', *Furrow*, xiii, no. 6 (June 1962), 349; *Ir. Press*, 21 June 1962; *Ir. Independent*, *passim*, esp. 8 Dec. 1973; *Ir. Times*, *passim*, esp.: 6 Mar. 1985; 25, 30 Aug. 2012; *Sunday Independent*, 14 May 1995; 3 Nov. 1996; 26 Aug. 2012; *Guardian*, 4 Apr. 2010; Frank McGuinness, 'Introductory address ... on 13 December 2010, on the occasion of conferring of the degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*'

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