

## **Jewel Theatre Audience Guide**

# **THE BEAUTY QUEEN OF LEENANE** by Martin McDonagh



**by Susan Myer Sifton, Dramaturg**  
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# ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

*I was too shy to be in a band and go on stage. I did write film scripts, but they were shit. I even wrote a radio play, too, and it was shit. Plays were really my last option. The reason I didn't write plays initially was because I thought theatre was the worst of all the art forms.*

—Martin McDonagh

## MARTIN McDONAGH TIMELINE

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**1970** Martin McDonagh is born on March 26 in southeast London. His mother is the former Mary Harte, originally from Killeenduff, Easky, County Sligo. She works as a chambermaid, and his father, John, who hails from Leitir Mealláin, Connemara, County Galway, is a construction worker. McDonagh and his brother John Michael, his only sibling and his elder by five years, will go on to spend many childhood summers in the west of Ireland, staying with their relatives.

The young family lives on a council estate (public housing project) in Elephant and Castle, where half his block is occupied by Irish families. McDonagh describes the community: “the Kellys on one side of the house and the Caseys on the other, and the Dubliners’ songs blaring out all afternoon” (O’Hagan, 2015). They move up the road to Camberwell when McDonagh is still a child.

**1984** McDonagh sees his first play, David Mamet’s *American Buffalo* at the Duke of York’s Theatre in the West End Theatre District of London. Al Pacino, his favorite film actor, plays Donny. When *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* goes to Broadway in 1997, McDonagh tells an interviewer that he saw “maybe twenty plays” in the thirteen years that followed (Lonergan, 2012).

**1986–1993** At sixteen years of age, McDonagh drops out of school and works at various jobs, including stocking shelves at a supermarket and doing clerical work at the Department of Trade and Industry. He steals stationery from the latter “to write his stories and plays on” (Ryman,

1998). When he's not working, he receives social welfare payments. His parents return to Lettermullen, in Connemara, for good in 1992, leaving him and his brother in London. They inherit "the tidy terrace house near Camberwell Green" (O'Hagan, 2015). Both John and Martin do a lot of writing in various genres. During this time, twenty-two of Martin's radio plays are reportedly rejected.

**1994** McDonagh decides to start writing in an exaggerated version of the speech he used to hear during his summer vacations in Ireland. He describes it later in 1998 to Fintan O'Toole (see "Resources") before the premiere of *The Leenane Trilogy*: "I wanted to develop some kind of dialogue style as strange and heightened as [playwrights David Mamet and Harold Pinter's], twisted in some way so the influence wasn't as obvious ... And then I sort of remembered the way my uncles spoke back in Galway, the structure of their sentences. I didn't think of it as structure, just as a kind of rhythm in the speech. And that seemed an interesting way to go, to try to do something with that language that wouldn't be English or American".

The language he develops becomes a catalyst for six plays that will become known as his Irish Plays. McDonagh writes them in a period of ten months between 1994 and 1995: *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (which he wrote in a week and a half), *A Skull in Connemara* and *The Lonesome West* (together known as *The Leenane Trilogy*), and *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (which he wrote in five weeks), *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* and *The Banshees of Inisher* (collectively known as *The Aran Islands Trilogy*). The Irish plays are produced between 1996 and 2003, with the exception of *The Banshees of Inisher*, which is still unproduced. "It isn't as good as the other two," McDonagh explains.

**1995** Garry Hynes, after a stint as Artistic Director of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, returns to Galway's Druid Theatre, a company she co-founded 20 years earlier. Druid is known for championing the work of unknown Irish playwrights and as a result, receives countless unsolicited submissions each year. Looking for an exciting new Irish work for the company's planned christening of Galway's new municipal Town Hall Theatre, slated for completion in early 1996, she reads through the latest manuscripts from the company's slush pile. She finds McDonagh's

first play, which he would develop as *A Skull in Connemara*. “I just couldn’t believe how funny it was”, she recalled in a later interview with Patrick Lonergan (Lonergan, 2012). “Straight away I asked, ‘Who is this guy?’” Druid’s staff knows little about McDonagh except that he is a London resident, and that after sending in the initial drafts of his plays, he has acquired an agent.

Hynes asks the staff to search for other plays the company has received from McDonagh, and they find *Beauty Queen* and a draft for what eventually would be *The Lonesome West*. Soon Hynes meets McDonagh, and they agree that Druid will option all three plays, with one to open their season in 1996. The only question remaining is which play to stage first. Anna Manahan, one of the most popular Irish actors of her generation, is available to play Mag. Marie Mullen, another popular actor and a co-founder of Druid Theatre Company, will play Maureen. Once the two actors are secured, Hynes dubs *Beauty Queen* as the play that will introduce Martin McDonagh to the world the following year.

Given McDonagh’s English citizenship, Hynes enlists the support of the Royal Court Theatre of London, which agrees to co-produce. The rest of *Beauty Queen* is cast and rehearsals begin as the year ends.

**1996** Druid Theatre premieres *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* at the Town Hall Theatre on February 1, with Garry Hynes as director. After a brief tour of cities in Ireland, it transfers to the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, opening on February 29. In November, the play opens at the Duke of York’s Theatre in London’s West End. It proves an enormous success in both countries. At the year’s close, McDonagh receives the George Devine Award as “Most Promising Newcomer,” an annual prize established in 1966 to honor the first director of the Royal Court Theatre. At the ceremony, Martin and his brother, drunk and rowdy, are admonished by Sean Connery, resulting in a confrontation that lights up the tabloids.

When it comes time for Druid to choose their next McDonagh play, Garry Hynes decides to stage all three—*The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, *A Skull in Connemara* and *The Lonesome West*—as *The Leenane Trilogy*.





*Marie Mullen as Maureen in Druid Theatre Company's world premiere of Beauty Queen, 1996. Photo credit Amelia Stein*

**1997** In January, *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, directed by Nicholas Hytner, opens at the National Theatre, London. In April, a reading of *The Pillowman*, McDonagh's first play that isn't set in Ireland, is staged at Druid as part of the Cúirt International Festival of Literature



*Martin McDonagh in 1997*

in Galway. In June, *A Skull in Connemara* and *The Lonesome West* premiere in Galway, where they play in repertory with *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* as *The Leenane Trilogy*. Garry Hynes again directs, and the *Trilogy* transfers to the Royal Court in London in July.

**1998** Now on tour, *The Leenane Trilogy* plays in the Sydney Festival in January, where the Australian media ask McDonagh many questions about his fascination with Australian soap opera. *Beauty Queen* opens in April at the Walter Kerr Theatre on Broadway and is nominated for six Tony Awards. It wins four—Best Supporting Actor (Tom Murphy, for his portrayal of Ray); Best Actress (Marie Mullen, for her portrayal of Maureen); Best Supporting Actress (Anna Manahan, for her portrayal of Mag); and Best Director (Garry Hynes). Hynes is the first woman to win a Tony for direction, and Tom Murphy becomes the first person to say the word “feck” on prime-time American television during his acceptance speech.

**1999** On April 27, *The Lonesome West* opens at the Lyceum Theatre on Broadway, where it is not as successful as *Beauty Queen* but nevertheless garners four Tony nominations. It will go on to reign in Ireland as one of McDonagh’s most popular plays, becoming part of the Irish post-primary school curriculum.

McDonagh tries in vain to find a producer for *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. He claims that the Royal National Theatre and the Royal Court of London have each regarded the play as “too dangerous to be done”; the companies counter that their respective decisions have to do with “quality control” (Lonergan, 2005). McDonagh declares publicly that until *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* is optioned, he will not release the rights to any of his other plays not already in or slated for production.

**2000** Druid’s production of *The Beauty Queen* receives an extended run in Dublin for the first time, appearing at the Gaiety Theatre for almost three months. While the play is a commercial success, Dublin theatre reviewers are generally critical of what they see as the production’s “stage Irish” qualities (Phillips, 2001).

**2001** On May 11, seven years after it is written, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* premieres with the Royal Shakespeare Company at The Other Place, Stratford-upon-Avon. Directed by Wilson Milam, it transfers to the Barbican in London later that year. *The Lonesome West* has its first extended run in Dublin, playing from August 2 to September 29.

**2002** *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* transfers to the Garrick Theatre in London's West End and receives an Olivier Award as Best New Comedy.

**2003** In November, *The Pillowman* receives its English premiere at the National Theatre in London. John Crowley directs.

**2004** *The Pillowman* wins an Olivier Award, the English equivalent of our Tony, for Best New Play.

**2005** McDonagh writes and directs *Six Shooter*, a short film. The National Theatre brings its production of *The Pillowman* to Cork, Ireland, where it plays for five nights in March. *The Pillowman* makes its American debut at the Booth Theater on Broadway in April. John Crowley again directs, and Jeff Goldblum and Billy Crudup play the two leading roles. It is nominated for four Tonys and wins two: one for set design and the other for lighting design.

**2006** McDonagh takes home the Academy Award for Best Short Film for *Six Shooter*. Wilson Milam's production of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* transfers from the Royal Shakespeare Company to the Off-Broadway Atlantic Theater in February. It garners several Lucille Lortel Award nominations and procures an Obie Award for Martin McDonagh for playwrighting. It then moves to Broadway in May, where it is nominated for five Tonys, including Best Direction, Best Play, Best Actor, Best Featured Actor and Best Featured Actress.

**2008** McDonagh's first feature film, *In Bruges*, is released. He writes and directs; Colin Farrell, Brendan Gleeson and Ralph Fiennes star. The film is a critical and commercial success. In September, Druid Theatre presents the first professional Irish production of *The Cripple of Inishmaan*. It transfers to Off-Broadway's Atlantic Theater in December.

**2009** McDonagh receives his second Oscar nomination, for Best Original Screenplay for *In Bruges*. Colin Farrell receives a Golden Globe for his performance in the film.

**2010** McDonagh's seventh play, *A Behanding in Spokane*, his first play set entirely in the United States, premieres on Broadway on March 8. It is directed by John Crowley and stars Christopher Walken, Sam Rockwell, Harry Dean Stanton and Tom Waits.

**2011** *The Guard*, a film written and directed by John Michael McDonagh, opens. Martin McDonagh executive produces it. As the year draws to a close, McDonagh's second feature film, *Seven Psychopaths*, enters into production.

**2012** *Seven Psychopaths* is set for a limited release on October 12, followed by a wider release on November 2. It receives critical acclaim and has decent box office receipts.

**2015** McDonagh's play, *Hangmen*, which is set in the United Kingdom, opens at the Royal Court Theatre, London. It is directed by Matthew Dunster, and David Morrissey and Reece Shearsmith star in the leading roles. *Hangmen* marks McDonagh's return to the London stage after a 12-year hiatus; his last play there was *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*.



*McDonagh in 2015*

After its premiere, *Hangmen* transfers to Wyndham's Theatre in London's West End. Unanimously acclaimed by theatre critics, it is



nominated for numerous awards including the Olivier Awards, Critics' Circle Theatre Awards and the Evening Standard Theatre Awards. For its U.S. premiere in 2018 at Off-Broadway's Atlantic Theater Company, *Hangmen* wins the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Foreign Play.

**2016** McDonagh's movie, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* goes into pre-production.

**2017** *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* is released. As with McDonagh's other movies, he is both writer and director. The film garners a high number of prestigious award nominations and wins several major awards, including Oscars for Best Actress for Frances McDormand and Best Supporting Actor for Sam Rockwell. It also wins three Screen Actors Guild Awards: Outstanding Performance by a Cast in a Motion Picture, Outstanding Performance by a Female Actor in a Leading Role for Frances McDormand, and Outstanding Performance by a Male Actor in a Supporting Role for Sam Rockwell.

# ABOUT THE PLAY

*I didn't set out wanting a scene in which those things happened to those people, but if you create the logic of that story it's going to end up in that dark place. The characters are going to converge like the iceberg and the Titanic.*

—Martin McDonagh

## CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

**Mag Folan** (Karel Wright) Maureen's mother, a widow living with her daughter on the rural family homestead in Leenane

**Maureen Folan** (Julie James) an unmarried woman living with and caring for her elderly mother

**Ray Dooley** (Travis Rynders) one of the youngest of a large Leenane family; Pato is his older brother

**Pato Dooley** (Andrew Davids) a resident of Leenane who goes to England every two months to live and work

*Of course it's beautiful here, a fool can see. The mountains and the green ...  
When I'm over there in London ... it's here I wish I was ... But when it's here I am  
... it isn't there I want to be ... But I know it isn't here I want to be either.*

—Pato Dooley, Act 1, Scene 3, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*

## SETTING

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As McDonagh describes in the beginning of his script, Leenane is located in County Galway, in the mountainous region of Connemara, which is part of Connaught, the western province of the five ancient provinces, or kingdoms, of Ireland. Connaught (or, alternately, Connacht), which lies in the western and northwestern areas of Ireland, is the poorest part of the Irish republic. Vulnerably open to the Atlantic, it was raided throughout history. Cromwell's English armies finally conquered Galway in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century and claimed its surrounding lands for English farmers to develop. However, they found the soil too rocky to cultivate, and the environment so bleak and wild that they settled in more hospitable areas.

The poor quality of the land endures to this day. The thin, rocky topsoil remains infertile and crops can't grow on the large expanses of soft bog, where only the edges can be drained and fertilized enough to yield crops. Years of deforestation have left the mostly treeless ground scant protection against wind and water erosion.

Even as the mid-nineties ushered in the Celtic Tiger, the name given to Ireland's economic high-tech boom, Leenane and its region have stayed poor, although they benefited from an surge in tourism as a result of increased income in other parts of the country. Visitors are drawn to Connemara because it is a Gaeltacht, an official preserve of native Gaelic speech. To this day, the residents have endeavored to maintain their Gaelic and Norman roots more than any other part of Ireland. The rich traditional folklore and culture they have preserved is another big draw for tourists.

Tourists also come for the area's idyllic landscape, the surrounding high moorlands, the peaceful waters of the Killary fiord (Leenane stands at the head of the tidal Killary Harbor), and the mountain ranges that rise

up around the small village. Leenane, as Seán Jennett describes in his 1970 book, *Connacht: The Counties Galway, Mayo, Sligo, Leitrim and Roscommon in Ireland*, is “the meeting point of so many grand ranges of mountains. Mweelrea closes the view along the narrow harbor, and to the east of it is Ben Gorm. To the south, the long ridge of the Maamturks begins and behind the houses there is the bulk of Devilsmother, the terminal western peak of the Partry mountains, whose principal summit on the central plateau is Maumtrasna”. Not much has changed in the last 47 years since Jennet wrote those words. The center of town remains a very small strip along the main road with a couple of bars, a restaurant, a post office and a couple of small grocery shops that also sell postcards and tourist knickknacks. On the opposite side of the road are Leenane’s Sheep and Wool Center and a craft shop.



*The beauty and remoteness of Leenane*

It is indeed picturesque, but not for the Leenane residents who inhabit the play. Fintan O’Toole, in his introduction to *Martin McDonagh Plays 1: The Beauty Queen of Leenane; A Skull in Connemara; The Lonesome*

*West*, writes "Nature as a source of beauty, consolation or inspiration is almost entirely absent from their lives. Nature is the rain and the mud and the steep rocky hills that you have to drag yourself up". In their audience guide for their 1999 production of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, the Denver Center Theatre Company describes the environment further:

The shoreline is rugged and dangerous, offering little shelter for harboring, and leaving fishermen exposed to the sudden violence of Atlantic storms. As a region, the west of Ireland is ill-suited for either farming or fishing.

The climate, too, is unfriendly most of the year. In December and January, a low-pressure system over the Atlantic brings strong winds and frontal rain. From February to June, the weather is dry, but cold. From late June or early July, a westerly, water-laden airflow produces cloud cover, humidity, and rainfall which can last until August or September. In October and November, rain may continue but daytime weather can be decent. May tends to be the sunniest month with an average of six to seven hours of sunshine per day.

Because the land in Connemara is so poor, most farmers require another source of income to survive. Many have turned their homes into guest houses, while some work in factories, hotels or restaurants. All are concerned with securing the peat (turf), which is the main source of fuel for Connemara homes. The peat is cut during May or June and laid out to dry. Later it is turned over, stacked to continue drying and finally brought home at the end of summer. The cutting and drying of turf is traditionally a man's job. Though modern technology has reached Western Ireland, the area is still viewed as primitive and provincial by many other Irish. [Reprinted with permission of the Denver Center Theatre Company.]

Emigration from Ireland, and in particular, the Connaught region, has been prevalent throughout its history. Connemara was hit particularly hard during the Great Hunger ("An Gorta Mor" in Gaelic). Half the potato



crop in Ireland was decimated by an infestation in 1845, increasing to three-quarters of the crop over the next seven years. Ireland was still a colony of Great Britain at the time and its native Irish “tenant” farmers relied heavily on the potato as a source of food. During the famine, which is also known as the Great Famine, the Great Potato Famine, and the Irish Potato Famine, roughly one million people died of starvation and epidemic disease between 1846 and 1851, nearly one-eighth of the entire Irish population. Some two million emigrated in a little more than a decade (1845-55), with most going to England and North America.

The rural west of Ireland, where the poorest lived, was depleted the most by death and mass emigration. Counties Mayo, Clare and Galway lost over 38% of their population in the two decades between 1841 and 1861. It was a turning point in Ireland’s cultural history: as the population diminished, the traditional communities were dislocated, the identities of the residents were fragmented, and the Gaelic cultural and linguistic heritage began to dissolve. This loss is one of the events in Irish history that contributes to Maureen’s exchange with Mag about language and English-Irish conflict that occurs in Act I, Scene 1. The emigration from the area continued unabated during the second half of the 19th century and endures to this day. Some, like Pato, opt to emigrate to countries with more opportunity. Others, like Maureen, stay in Leenane and give in to frustration, bitterness and weary hopelessness. The remainder, like Ray and Mag, just survive day to day.

In the early nineties when the play is set, the characters in *Beauty Queen* live on the margins of a globalized culture. They are isolated and cut off. This sense of isolation, combined with economic deprivation, the dark, dank weather, and harsh living conditions permeate their lives.

*You can't kick a cow in Leenane without some bastard holding a grudge  
twenty year.*

—Pato Dooley, Act I, Scene 3, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*

## TIME

Although McDonagh doesn't specify, there is a major clue that the year of the play is 1992. In Act I, Scene 2, Mag tells Ray, "There was a priest in the news yesterday had a babby with a Yank". She is referring to Eamonn Casey, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Galway, who was forced to resign when *The Irish Times* of Dublin broke the news on May 7, 1992 that he had fathered a child by an American divorcee, Annie Murphy. Murphy was raising the boy in Connecticut after giving birth to him in 1974 in Dublin. Casey had been sending her money, which he stole from church funds, later claiming it had been replaced by parishioners.



*Casey in 1975, a year after his son was born. He was known for his love of fast cars and fine wines.*

The story emerged in the days when priestly sexual abuse and the pedophilia scandals of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland were still unheard of. People were especially shocked by Bishop Casey, who was popular and well-regarded for his work with the poor and homeless and for his progressive views.

Disgraced, Casey abdicated his position; his status as bishop was never restored. In 2006, after being exiled to South America for 14 years, he was permitted to return to Ireland, where he lived out his days as a parish priest. He was never allowed to return to public ministry or say Mass in public again in Ireland.

When McDonagh was writing the play in 1994, Ireland was in a lengthy period of economic stagnation marked by high unemployment, emigration, and despite the high tax levels, crippling public debt. Very soon, much of the country would experience tremendous financial growth in a very short time. The time of the play precedes the aforementioned “Celtic Tiger,” the economic boom years between 1995 and 1997, when Ireland jumped from being one of the poorest countries in Europe to one of the richest in only a matter of years. Much of it was due to an influx of investors, many of which were tech firms, lured by the country's favorable tax rates. Had McDonagh written his play just a year later, he may have told a far different story. Perhaps the residents of McDonagh’s Leenane would not have lived in hopelessness. Technology and the advent of the Internet would have widened their world and likely reduced their sense of isolation. Pato would no longer need to find work in England—or for that matter, America—as construction boomed to meet the demand for new buildings for the tech companies that were flooding Ireland’s cities east of Leenane. With the advent of the Internet, which provided so many new means of getting a message to someone, he would not have needed to rely on his brother to deliver a handwritten letter.

*A bleak, black comedy, [The Beauty Queen of Leenane] focuses on an embittered 40-year-old spinster and her cantankerous old mother. The two live in a damp, ugly cottage in the west of Ireland and torment each other to great comic effect. But when the daughter takes up with a man, the play turns adeptly from comedy to tragedy.*

—Sarah Hemming, "Gift of the Gab", *Independent*, 1996

## **SYNOPSIS (PARTIAL)**

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The play opens with Mag Folan sitting in her rocking chair in the living room/kitchen of her rural cottage in the dreary, rain-soaked, remote mountains of Connemara in Western Ireland. She shares the home with her daughter Maureen. Maureen comes in from the heavy rain, and she and Mag are soon bickering, their common mode of communication.

The next scene brings young Ray Dooley to the Folan's cottage to invite them to a party his family is giving the following evening for their uncle, who is returning to Boston after a holiday in Leenane. When Ray departs, Mag burns the invitation. Maureen returns after Ray has left and asks her mother if she has had visitors. When Mag denies it, Maureen persists. She knows her mother is lying because she passed Ray on the road as he was leaving. Mag finally admits to the visit, but not the invitation. Maureen forces her to drink a cold, lumpy cup of Complan, a nutritional drink, to punish her deceitfulness. When she met up with Ray, she tells her mother, he extended the invitation. Mag warns her against "gallivanting" with men at the party. Maureen is looking forward to gallivanting—she reveals that she has only ever been with two men, and they merely kissed. She makes plans to drive with her mother to a nearby city to buy a new dress to wear to the party.

The next scene is at night, after the party. Maureen and Pato Dooley enter the Folan home, quite inebriated and very happy to be together. Pato reveals he will be back in England soon for his work. Maureen asks him if he is involved romantically with anyone, and he tells her he is not. After having tea and a bit of "smooching," they go to her bedroom.

The next morning (Act I, Scene 3), Mag shuffles to the kitchen and, as

she does each morning, “pegs” (throws) her potty of “wee” in the sink. She picks up Maureen’s discarded dress and complains about its skimpiness and its cost. Pato enters, startling her. He offers to make her Complan and porridge. As the two begin to talk at the kitchen table about Mag’s scalded hand, Maureen interrupts, entering dressed only in her slip. She throws herself into Pato’s lap, kissing him passionately, to his embarrassment and her mother’s disgust. Furious, feeling threatened, and hoping to dissuade Pato’s interest in her daughter, Mag tells him that it was Maureen who scalded her hand by pouring hot oil over it. She also discloses that Maureen spent time in a mental hospital, which leads to a loud verbal exchange between the two women. When Mag exits to produce the discharge papers as proof of her daughter’s institutionalization, Maureen explains to Pato how the cruelty and racial slurs she endured more than 15 years ago working as a chambermaid in England led to a nervous breakdown. Pato sympathizes, assuring her, “There’s no shame at all in that. Only means you do think about things and take them to heart”. Still, when he asks Maureen to put on some clothes to ward off the morning chill, she feels rebuffed and tells him to leave. Despite Pato’s reassurance that he isn’t rejecting her, the couple part on less than favorable terms. Nevertheless, he promises to write to her from England.

***We’re ending the synopsis here in order to preserve the play's plot surprises. For those who wish to read the entire synopsis, it is provided in its entirety in a separate document.***



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