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## Loving the Art in Yourself

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## 2 | Loving the art in yourself

### Mary Moynihan

After spending five years in New York, training and performing with theatre practitioners such as 'Erwin Piscator, Saul Colin, Lee Strasberg and Allan Miller'<sup>1</sup>, American-born Deirdre O'Connell (1939-2001) came to Ireland and founded the Stanislavski Acting Studio of Dublin in May 1963.

The Stanislavski studio was so named as the type of training that Deirdre wanted to bring to Ireland. It was based on the theatrical theory and techniques of the Russian Theatre practitioner, actor and director Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938), founder and theatre administrator of the Moscow Art Theatre and creator of the Stanislavski system of actor training, 'the most influential system of acting in the Western World'.<sup>2</sup>

The Stanislavski approach is a system of training, not a specific style of acting, that aims to provide the skills necessary for the actor to develop the inner life; the emotional and sensory life of the character. There is a commitment to ensemble acting and teamwork and work characterized by a truthful and deep 'moment-to-moment aliveness'<sup>3</sup> in performance, generating theatre that is creative as opposed to

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<sup>1</sup> Focus Theatre Programme, *Buried Child* by Sam Shepard, Focus Theatre, August 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Edited by Martin Banham, *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* (USA: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 923.

<sup>3</sup> Lee Strasberg, *A Dream of Passion, The Development of the Method*, edited by Evangeline Morphos (Great Britain, Methuen Drama, 1989), p. 38.

representational. The work is rooted in the actor's sense of self and the development of the 'sensual and emotional capacity of the actors'.<sup>4</sup>

Under supervision, the actor works on areas such as relaxation, focus and concentration, imagination, physical action and a belief in it, sense memory, emotional memory, the creative flow, and the use of objectives and given circumstances, exploring how these areas help to train the actor's inner creative state in order to create truthful behaviour on stage. The actor develops the skills necessary to recreate, through the senses, the conditions conducive to a creative state before beginning work on a role. Stanislavski's approach to actor training is based on continuous observation of successful acting practice and is not a rigid approach. As he said himself, 'create your own method'.

The Stanislavski Acting Studio was originally set up by Deirdre, an actor, director and teacher, for the purpose of training a permanent company of actors and directors and this resulted in the opening of the Focus Theatre, and the planned development of the Stanislavski Studio four years later in September 1967 in Pembroke Place, off Upper Pembroke Street, Dublin 2.

The Focus Theatre opened its door on September 29, 1967 with a production of *Play with a Tiger* by Doris Lessing which ran for four weeks. The opening of the 72-seat Focus Theatre 'was a dream realized for the late Deirdre O'Connell'<sup>5</sup>. Over the next 45 years, from its opening in 1967 to its closure in 2012, the Focus Theatre and Stanislavski Studio produced over 300 plays by internationally-renowned playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Lillian Hellman, Doris Lessing, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Jean Genet, Marguerite Duras, Athol Fugard and Samuel Beckett, as well as training and showcasing the work of many well-known Irish actors, directors and writers, 'thus becoming an important part of late 20th-century Irish theatre history'.<sup>6</sup>

### Beginnings

Eleanora Deirdre O'Connell was born to Irish immigrant parents on June 16, 1939 in the South Bronx district of New York City. Deirdre was one of five siblings. Her father Michael J. O'Connell was born in Glengala, Co Sligo and her mother, Nellie Taafe, came from Banteer in

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Deirdre O'Connell, Artistic Director, Focus Theatre by Mary Moynihan, April 22, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> [www.nli.ie/pdfs/mss%20lists/140\\_FocusTheatre.pdf](http://www.nli.ie/pdfs/mss%20lists/140_FocusTheatre.pdf), p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> [www.nli.ie/pdfs/mss%20lists/140\\_FocusTheatre.pdf](http://www.nli.ie/pdfs/mss%20lists/140_FocusTheatre.pdf), p. 5.



Co Cork. After finishing school, Deirdre won a scholarship to attend night classes and study at Erwin Piscator's New York Dramatic Workshop, 'and her parents encouraged her to pursue her passion for acting. While performing in one of the various productions at the Dramatic Workshop's Repertory Theatre, she was spotted by Lee Strasberg and invited to join the Actor's Studio where she discovered the Stanislavski system, which was to become her lifelong passion and the Focus Theatre's artistic policy'.<sup>7</sup>

By 1963 Deirdre had completed her formal education in theatre and had also become a 'life member' of the Actors Studio in New York which she attended for two years, 'one year while completing my course in the Erwin Piscator Dramatic Workshop and then visiting for a second year before coming to Ireland'.<sup>8</sup>

Deirdre believed that having a desire to find a sense of truth in her performance naturally drew her 'towards Erwin Piscator, Saul Colin and eventually Lee Strasberg, all of whom worked with different points of emphasis'<sup>9</sup> through the Stanislavski system where the aim was the development of the inner life: the emotional and sensory life of the person or character you were going to become eventually.

According to Deirdre she devoted a substantial part of her life to teaching and using the Stanislavski system because:

I was drawn towards the concept of at least attempting, if not always achieving, to recreate the moment every night and within myself, to make it possible for the actor to relive, to recreate, not just for oneself but as a means of communication for the audience, that it could be done, alive, afresh, anew every night and even at that tender age I did see the difference between representational theatre and what I regard to be creative theatre.<sup>10</sup>

When Deirdre O'Connell arrived in Dublin in 1963 at the age of twenty-three her main aim was to establish a full-time repertory company 'and the only way to start a company was to train one'.<sup>11</sup> As

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<sup>7</sup> [www.nli.ie/pdfs/mss%20lists/140\\_FocusTheatre.pdf](http://www.nli.ie/pdfs/mss%20lists/140_FocusTheatre.pdf), p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Deirdre O'Connell, Artistic Director, Focus Theatre by Mariosa de Faoite, July 1994.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Deirdre O'Connell, Artistic Director, Focus Theatre by Mary Moynihan, April 22, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Deirdre O'Connell, Artistic Director, Focus Theatre, by Mariosa de Faoite July 1994, tape 1.



Deirdre said herself she was aware of her skills as a 'communicator'<sup>12</sup> and so she set up the Stanislavski Studio in order to train actors and directors in the Stanislavski System and more importantly to lay the foundation for a permanent repertory company – an objective that led to the founding of the Focus Theatre four years later.

The first studios were conducted at the Pocket Theatre, Ely Place, in Dublin, at the invitation of its director Ursula White Lennon, and commenced in April 1963 after advertised auditions had been held. Early members of the new company included Declan and Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy, Sabina Coyne, Tom Hickey, Tim McDonnell, Frank McDonald, Johnny Murphy, Meryl Gourley and Joan Bergin. According to original studio member and actor Tim McDonnell 'I saw an article in the *Irish Press* with a photograph of Deirdre O'Connell stating that the 'method' was coming to Dublin and that she was about to begin classes in a small theatre called the Pocket Theatre and I ran down immediately and made an appointment to see her the following Saturday. In those days Deirdre held auditions for the studio. She gave you...tests, a test in relaxation, imagination and...depending on how you did, you were either accepted or not. But I think she accepted everyone (laughs). So I went down and saw her and within a month started classes in the Pocket Theatre in Ely Place...It was 1963, we met every Saturday and Sunday and did classes and exercises by Stanislavski, myself and other founder members of the studio including Tom Hickey and Johnny Murphy'.<sup>13</sup>

The Stanislavski Studio was the first actor-training studio of its kind in Ireland. At that time there was no 'Irish Academy of Dramatic Art...no real training in theatre'.<sup>14</sup> The development of the actor's skills has always been at the heart of the Focus Theatre and Deirdre's introduction to Ireland of the Stanislavski system was seen as a radical style of training, which enabled the actor, while being individually supervised, to be trained in how to work on his or her art and develop a conscious acting technique. The deeper the actor's experience of his or her part, selected, controlled and artistically expressed, the fuller the audience's involvement and participation will be. The philosophy of the studio emphasizes the creative role of the actor while at the same time insisting on group or ensemble teamwork as the essence of good

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Tim McDonnell (1991) *Focus Theatre Newsletter*, Issue 2, September/ October 1991, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Manning, *The Arts in Ireland*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1975, p. 63.



theatre. This emphasis on ensemble became the hallmark of many Focus productions over the coming years as observed by *The Irish Times*, 'superb acting, a strong sense of ensemble playing'.<sup>15</sup>

According to Tim:

...there is no doubt that in the Dublin theatre of that period there was a very deep reluctance to accept training or discipline of any kind, the idea was that an actor basically needed nothing more than natural talent...that has changed nowadays as most theatre schools have absorbed most if not all of Stanislavski's training but back in 1964 this stuff seemed WILD. You may not believe it but for many months the studio had visiting psychiatrists invited by one of the studio members who witnessed the improvisational work and effective memories. It was just an absolutely new thing.<sup>16</sup>

The studio members trained and rehearsed from April to November and the first production by the studio was *For Madmen Only*, an adaptation of Nobel Prize winner Herman Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, staged at the Pocket Theatre on October 7, 1963. With the closure of the Pocket Theatre the following year for development, the studio members had to move elsewhere. The studio then had a number of different bases including the Royal Irish Academy of Music, the Pike Theatre, and the Dublin Shakespeare Society premises then in Fitzwilliam Square. During this period studio members continued to meet twice weekly to work together on the Stanislavski System and to develop skills in improvisation. Public improvisational performances were held in different venues around the city including the Dublin Shakespeare Society venue, the Embankment in Tallaght, and the Project Art Gallery, and also as open-air performances in public parks. Studio members performed in Meryl Gourley's productions of *Calvary* and *Resurrection* by William Butler Yeats, staged at Players Theatre in Trinity College, Dublin. Having to constantly change venue for productions encouraged Deirdre and the other studio members to look for their own permanent premises to house the Stanislavski Studio.

During this period Deirdre O'Connell worked as a singer and actor in order to raise money for a permanent theatre space. As a 'noted ballad and folk singer'<sup>17</sup> she sang in working men's clubs in England,

<sup>15</sup> Review by Derek West of *The Balcony* by Jean Genet, *The Irish Times*, April 27, 1992.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Tim McDonnell, *Focus Theatre Newsletter*, Issue 2, September / October 1991, p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> [www.nli.ie/pdfs/mss%20lists/140\\_FocusTheatre.pdf](http://www.nli.ie/pdfs/mss%20lists/140_FocusTheatre.pdf), p. 6.



returning to Dublin to run the Stanislavski studios and on one of the visits home she met the singer Luke Kelly (1940-1984), a member of the Irish music group the Dubliners. They met in

O'Donoghue's pub, Merrion Row, Dublin, and they were married on June 21, 1965. Deirdre also returned to New York several times to work in summer season productions to raise more money for her project'.<sup>18</sup>

In 1967, after a long period of searching, perseverance and determination by the studio members, a permanent premises was eventually found in a lane off Pembroke Street by Declan Burke-Kennedy – an empty and abandoned clothing-label factory space at 6 Pembroke Place that was in a considerable state of disrepair.

According to Tim Mc Donnell 'I remember people were literally walking around town in small battalions trying to find a suitable premises to house the fledgling Focus Theatre Company. It was Declan Burke-Kennedy who found the place...in Pembroke Place. We had done the work together, embraced this new system together and the final conclusion was putting our own theatre together'.<sup>19</sup> A lease was taken out on the premises at Pembroke Place, organized by Deirdre O'Connell and Declan Burke-Kennedy and a fund-raising campaign launched to raise the £3,000 required to renovate and convert the disused space into a 72-seat theatre. Money came from donations and subscriptions, including income provided by Deirdre O'Connell and Luke Kelly, from Mick McCarthy, owner of the Embankment in Tallaght and from co-founders/studio members Mary Elizabeth and Declan Burke-Kennedy, and eventually funding was also received from the Arts Council and Dublin City Council. With assistance from Burke-Kennedy Architects, the derelict site was transformed into a working theatre space. As part of the fundraising campaign, in return for £10 or more, friends and supporters were offered 'the status of patron and an unlimited promise of free admission to the theatre'.<sup>20</sup>

The opening of the theatre in 1967 was the culmination of four years hard work and planning. From 1967 until 2012 when the actual building closed down, the Focus Theatre operated as a venue-based production

<sup>18</sup> [www.nli.ie/pdfs/mss%20lists/140\\_FocusTheatre.pdf](http://www.nli.ie/pdfs/mss%20lists/140_FocusTheatre.pdf), p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Tim Mc Donnell, Focus Theatre Newsletter, Issue 2, September / October 1991. Page 9.

<sup>20</sup> Burke-Kennedy, Declan, Booklet *Dublin Focus Theatre incorporating the Stanislavski studio*, article on The Focus Theatre by Declan Burke-Kennedy, p. 6.



company, presenting two to three professional theatre productions a year, covering a full repertoire of Irish and international theatre, including the great classics.

Deirdre O'Connell worked as Artistic Director, manager and fundraiser of the Focus Theatre and Stanislavski Studio from 1967 until her death in 2001 as well as acting in most of the major productions presented. The artistic policy of Focus Theatre was to present plays not commonly known in Ireland, which may not have been seen by the Irish public, and plays were never chosen for their commercial value but on the basis of merit. According to Deirdre O'Connell, plays were chosen that featured 'central, very focused relationships, strong characterization and strong, inner-based themes'<sup>21</sup> and this criterion was reflected in the continuing work of the Stanislavski Studio where the emphasis remained on the development of the 'sensual and emotional capacity of the actors'.<sup>22</sup>

The company encouraged new Irish playwrights by presenting an annual lunchtime season of new Irish plays, and over the years showcased the work of Irish playwrights including Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy, Declan Burke-Kennedy, Tommy O'Neill, Tony Cafferty, Ena May, Carmel Winters, Michael Harding, Elizabeth Moynihan, Malachy McKenna and Frank Shouldice.

Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy was to write and direct several successful shows at Focus Theatre including her own *Daughters*, a feminist retelling of an ancient Irish myth; *The Golden Goose* by the Grimm Brothers, which she dramatized and directed; and *Legends* and *Currigh the Shapeshifter*, the latter adapted from the Red Branch legend. Mary Elizabeth is a successful writer, director and teacher of drama who went on to establish the successful Storytellers Theatre Company in 1986.

Throughout the years Focus Theatre supported and at times organized a range of music nights at the venue and off-site, including an annual Sunday Night Music season during July and August. Musicians and performers who took part included Anthony Cronin, Benedict Kiely, Niall Tóibín, Uinsin Ó Donnabháin, Frank Harte, Paul Brady, Paddy Reilly, Paddy Glackin, Liam Weldon, Brídín Gilroy, Donal Lunny, Séamus Mac Mathúna, Tony McMahon, Pearse Hutchinson,

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with Deirdre O'Connell, Artistic Director, Focus Theatre, by Mariosa de Faoite July 1994. Tape 2.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Deirdre O'Connell, Artistic Director, Focus Theatre, by Mary Moynihan, April 22, 1999.



Seán Potts, Mick Fitzgerald, Mark Dignam, Mundy, Hugh Doolan, Tom Roche, Joe Molloy, Glen Hansard, Eoin O'Brien, Miriam Ingram, Rosaleen Lynch, Máirtín Byrnes, Christy Moore, Barry Moore, Johnny Moynihan and Roger Doyle. Jazz music nights at Focus Theatre featured artists such as Louis Stewart, Tommy Halferty, Ronan Guilfoyle, Conor Guilfoyle, Mike Nielsen and John Wadham.

The second play presented by Focus Theatre was *Kelly's Eye* by Henry Livings, which ran for three weeks. This was followed in 1968 by a five-week run of *Evening without Angels*, consisting of one-act American plays; Eugene O'Neill's *In the Zone*, Tennessee Williams' *Portrait of a Madonna* and William Saroyan's *Hello Out There*. In July 1968 Focus Theatre presented a double bill of *Miss Julie* by August Strindberg and *The Wedding* by Anton Chekhov, followed by the company's fifth production, Lillian Hellman's *Toys in the Attic* in October. February 1969 saw the opening of *Antigone* by Jean Anouilh which ran for six weeks followed by a five-week run of *In Camera* by Jean Paul Sartre and then a double bill of new plays consisting of *The Creation* by Lee Gallagher and *Lunch Hour* by John Mortimer.

At that time the *Evening Press* saw Focus as 'one of the most exciting theatrical ventures we have had in Dublin' and *The Irish Times* said 'Dublin Focus Theatre is performing a great service to the city and country by its integrity, dedication and the excellence of its actors'.<sup>23</sup>

Because of the limited number of seats, Focus Theatre often struggled financially. From the beginning the premises housed the Stanislavski Studio, which continued to operate on a weekly basis as a training forum for actors under the direction of Deirdre O'Connell. Studio members paid an average membership fee of £1 per week and this money was often used to pay bills for the Focus Theatre. According to founder member Declan Burke-Kennedy 'it had been agreed from the outset that 50% of the box office takings would have to go towards production and publicity costs and that the remainder would be divided, on a percentage basis, among the actors and stage crew. During the five-week run of *Evening without Angels*, the actors took home an average of about £2 per week for their troubles'.<sup>24</sup> In June 1968 the Arts Council gave Focus £500 as a 'guarantee against losses incurred in the area of production and publicity alone, i.e. excluding the payment of

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<sup>23</sup> Declan Burke-Kennedy, Booklet *Dublin Focus Theatre incorporating the Stanislavski studio*, article on The Focus Theatre by Declan Burke-Kennedy, p. 8.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.



actors and others'. So while the contribution saved the life of the theatre<sup>25</sup> by helping to pay bills and keep Focus operating, it did not support the actors.

### Classics

Despite the financial difficulties during the 1970s and 1980s the Focus Theatre went from strength to strength artistically. The company enjoyed critical acclaim for presenting high quality productions of the powerful classical dramas of the Norwegian playwright, poet and theatre director Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), Swedish author August Strindberg (1849-1912) and Russian dramatist and short story writer Anton Chekhov (1860-1904). Plays by these authors provided a unique vehicle for the Stanislavski-trained Focus actors to bring to life the fullness of the psychologically-driven relationships through ensemble playing, and a depth of emotion that became hallmarks of Focus productions. Deirdre and the original founder members of Focus created an artistic policy that put the ensemble at the heart of the work:

From the beginning, the Focus Theatre has attempted to create an all-too-rare example of group art, that is to say a concerted pooling together of individual talents and energy towards a commonly-agreed artistic goal. By its constitution and structure, it is not, and does not desire to be, a platform for individual performers more concerned with their own careers than with the artistic endeavour on hand. It is no surprise, therefore, that the finest Focus productions have been noted for 'teamwork' and 'integrity'; for their clear sense of direction and their 'disciplined performances'.<sup>26</sup>

The works of Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov are ensemble plays depicting universal human conditions and emotional crises, exploring the conflict between private and public spheres and the lives of men and women trapped or struggling in various ways to break free and find fulfillment. The psychological depth and complex characterization of the plays were well served by the Stanislavski-trained Focus actors. As Artistic Director, Deirdre chose plays on the basis of having strong human relationships, and the work of Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov provided a study of human conflict and an exploration of people's lives and desires and the need to live differently as they pursued goals and dreams that were often in conflict with the society around them.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 3.



Drawn by the sexual tension and intense conflicts that trap the men and women in August Strindberg's plays, Focus Theatre presented three of his works, *Miss Julie* in 1968, *The Father* in 1972, and *Dance of Death* in 1978. All three plays touch on themes of love, class and the power struggles of sexual politics. In the introduction to *Miss Julie* Strindberg wrote that what we need is 'first and last...a small stage and a small house; then a new dramatic art might rise and the theatre might at least become an institution for the entertainment of people with culture'.<sup>27</sup> The intimate nature of the Focus Theatre Space was ideally suited for bringing to life the plays of Strindberg, Ibsen and Chekhov.

In January 1970 Focus Theatre presented *Uncle Vanya* by Anton Chekhov which played to full houses for ten weeks (the company had already performed his play *The Wedding* in 1968). *Uncle Vanya* was followed by Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, which ran for 12 weeks. In this and other Ibsen plays, Focus had great success in portraying the emotional turmoil of Ibsen's characters as they struggled to free themselves from the suffocating conventions of a class-ridden society.

Press coverage for *Hedda Gabler* stated that 'one must once again return thanks to the brave little Focus Theatre for bringing to the Dublin stage the type of quality play which the major theatres steadfastly ignore...This is the only theatre in the country which regularly puts on great plays and I mean the only theatre. It is also unique and exciting in its methods of approaching a play'.<sup>28</sup>

In 1971 the company presented *A Doll's House*, also by Henrik Ibsen, which ran for five months from November 1971 to March 1972. Nora Helmer in *A Doll's House* is a woman searching for freedom and independence. She is trapped in a male-dominated environment and struggles against domestic oppression and the traditional, subservient role of wife and mother. The play reflects a common theme of Ibsen's work, the individual power struggle in opposition to the oppression of a wider social authority, particularly in relation to middle-class society. Themes of sexual identity, desire and the individual struggle for self-determination can also be found in *Hedda Gabler* and other productions by Ibsen presented by Focus Theatre including *John Gabriel Borkman* (1974 and 1991), *Rosmersholm* (1976), *The Lady from the Sea* (1980), *Ghosts* (1985), *Little Eyolf* (1990) and *The Master*

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<sup>27</sup> Strindberg, August, *Works of August Strindberg: Miss Julie, the Father, Creditors, the Outlaw, the Road to Damascus, the Stronger and Other Plays*. Author's Preface to *Miss Julie*.

<sup>28</sup> Declan Burke-Kennedy, p 12.



*Builder* (1991). In relation to *Little Eyolf*, Brian Brennan of *The Sunday Independent* (October 1990) wrote that 'it is significant that this traditional staging of a rarely-seen Ibsen turns out to be one of the most satisfying value for money productions to emerge from the Dublin Theatre Festival. The old classic holds its own beside many of its more ambitious rivals and the idea of staging it at all seems almost revolutionary'.

### Improvisation

From its inception in 1963 until the early 1970s an important part of the Stanislavski Studio was the development and use of improvisation for public performances. According to Deirdre O'Connell, the studio only did one production from 1963 to 1967 but 'theatrically we kept performing as Ireland's only improvisation theatre'.<sup>29</sup>

In February 1971 the studio members began an innovative programme of Sunday night improvisation theatre:

...the studio members inaugurated 'a year long series of improvised performances' which showed 'oodles of resources and ingenuity' according to *The Evening Press* and provide 'an enlightening and stimulating evening for the *Evening Herald*. One of the performers, Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy, described the work as 'nerve-wracking, we would sometimes take a theme and develop it from week to week, like a soap opera. I remember one which concerned an imaginary family in the west of Ireland, near where uranium was supposed to have been discovered, it went on for about 6 weeks'.<sup>30</sup>

The improvisations were unscripted ad-lib enactments on stage, based on a specific pre-chosen theme or issue. After agreeing on the dramatic issue at the core of the work, the actors prepared by setting up and working on character development and relationships beforehand as well as discussing in detail the time and place (where and when) for the improvisation. However

because it is unscripted an 'improv' has a spontaneous power all its own and often a degree of realism which can be quite

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Deirdre O'Connell, Artistic Director, Focus Theatre, by Mariosa de Faoite July 1994, tape 1.

<sup>30</sup> Mary Moynihan, 'The Stanislavski Studio of Dublin. Exploring the use of the Stanislavski System (exercises and programme of actor training) as practised by the Focus Stanislavski Studio', dissertation, 30 April, 1991, p. 12.



unnerving...the actions and words that the audience witness are in no way rehearsed or prearranged.<sup>31</sup>

The improvisations were like plays 'communally and spontaneously created and in that way can take on a richness and an authority which it takes a truly gifted author to possess'.<sup>32</sup> During the live performance of the improvisations the actors used soliloquies to develop the audience's understanding of a particular storyline by moving 'in and out of naturalism at the switch of a particular light, to give a personal view of what was going on, in the sense of some personal story or recollection'.<sup>33</sup>

According to Declan Burke-Kennedy another important element of the improvisation work was:

...its immediate relevance to the social context in which it is performed. The issues proposed and embodied by the actors are those which most bear down on them from day to day. Even when the issue is proposed by the audience, the individual interpretation of it is inevitably coloured by the social experience and outlook of each individual actor. It is the fusion (sometimes confusion) of those individual personalities and points of view that constitute the dramatic essence of improvisational theatre.<sup>34</sup>

The public improvisations played a key role in developing the ethos of ensemble playing which the theatre was committed to because in improvisation 'togetherness and co-operation are the basic ingredients and the process, as well as being of dramatic value for the audience, is an experience which continually directs the actor away from the isolationist and virtuoso tendencies that bedevil this most vain of trades'.<sup>35</sup> Public improvisations ceased after the 1970s and were revived briefly during the late 1990s. Improvisational exercises continued to be used extensively as part of the training provided by the Stanislavski studio and in rehearsals for Focus Theatre productions.

In 1986 Deirdre O'Connell received the Harvey's Theatre Award for Outstanding Contribution to Irish Theatre. Another success for Focus Theatre was *Diary of a Madman* translated by Ronald Wilks and

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<sup>31</sup> Declan Burke-Kennedy, p. 17.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Thompson, 'Method in their Madness 21 Years of the Focus Theatre', *Theatre Ireland - Retrospective*, 1987, p. 32.

<sup>34</sup> Declan Burke-Kennedy, p. 17.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

adapted by Tim McDonnell from the work of Nikolai Gogol, with Tim performing the sole role of Poprishchin, and Deirdre O'Connell directing. Tim was one of the original founder members of Focus Theatre acting in early productions including the first Focus show *Play with a Tiger*.

After being involved with Focus in the early years, Tim moved to the United States to work on building up a successful acting career there. In 1981 in New York Tim was involved in a tragic accident in which he lost the use of his legs and became confined to a wheelchair. After the accident Tim returned to Ireland and in 1987 took to the stage with *Diary of a Madman*, produced by Focus Theatre and first performed at the Project Arts Centre on 28<sup>th</sup> September to excellent reviews.

Deirdre took the early rehearsals for *Diary of a Madman* in Tim's home with Tim sitting on the bed and they rehearsed for four months, Deirdre visiting twice a week, and eventually rehearsals moved into the Focus Theatre. The play ran at the Project Arts Centre for the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1987 and Tim won the Harvey's Award for Best Actor in the same year. In March 1988 *Diary of a Madman* ran at the Peacock Theatre, Dublin and in 1989 toured to New York and played for 22 performances at the Irish Arts Centre where it again received excellent reviews. Tim won a Best Actor Obie award for his performance in New York in 1989. *Diary of a Madman* was made into a film, produced and directed by Ronan O'Leary, sponsored by RTÉ, and filmed over five-and-a-half days in Ardmore Studios in 1990. In the film Deirdre O'Connell performed the role of Mavra.

### Later Years

The 1990s began with a very successful production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* by American playwright Edward Albee directed by Ann Maloney O'Driscoll with Deirdre playing the role of Martha, Sean Treacy as George, and Bairbre Ní Chaoimh and Brent Hearne as Honey and Nick. 'Like its giant forebear, Strindberg's *Dance of Death*, the play begins in hell, and all the revelations and reactions take place within that landscape'.<sup>36</sup> The play first premiered on Broadway in 1962 with Uta Hagan as Martha and Arthur Hill as George, and was made into a film in 1966 with Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, the latter winning an Oscar for her performance as Martha, a 'virago of a wife'.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Stanley Kauffmann, *New York Times*, June 24, 1966, Movies.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*



The emotionally violent production at Focus Theatre received excellent reviews, portraying the depths of a disturbed relationship and the struggle for psychological growth in the face of thwarted ambition, expectation and hope.

To take on Edward Albee's mammoth work *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and attempt to stage it at the tiny Focus Theatre (without Liz Taylor and Richard Burton) could be described as foolhardy indeed...(however) four wonderful actors...have attacked the play and succeeded in wresting out of it one of the most rewarding night's theatre a Dublin audience can hope to see<sup>38</sup>

and

Albee's play reaches a shattering climax. The Focus production is one of the best for years...with a portrayal of intense emotional power, marvelously sustained by Deirdre O'Connell.<sup>39</sup>

A particular success during the 1990s was *A View from the Bridge* by Arthur Miller, which opened at Focus Theatre in October 1991 as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival and then subsequently, due to its success, transferred to the larger Andrews Lane Theatre. The 'riveting production has all the elements of classic Greek tragedy'<sup>40</sup> and 'proved a great success...and kept its audience clapping long after the players had left the stage'.<sup>41</sup>

Throughout the 1990s, Focus Theatre continued to produce old and new plays ranging from nineteenth century classics to contemporary world drama – staging work such as Clifford Odets' *Rocket to the Moon* (1990); *The Secret Rapture* by David Hare and *Small Craft Warnings* by Tennessee Williams, (1991); *The Balcony* by Jean Genet, *The Misogynist* by Michael Harding and *Alice Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll, adapted by Robert Lane (1992); *All My Sons* by Arthur Miller (1993); *Men Without Shadows* by Jean Paul Sartre (1995); *Night, Mother* by Marsha Norman (1997); *Anna Christie* by Eugene

<sup>38</sup> Lorcan Roche, 'Fearless Cast Reap Success', *Irish Independent*, 3 January, 1990.

<sup>39</sup> John Finegan, 'Classic Return', *Evening Herald*, 3 January, 1990.

<sup>40</sup> Gerry Colgan, 'A View from the Bridge at the Focus', *The Irish Times*, 11 October, 1991.

<sup>41</sup> Patricia Murray, 'Success for Classic Miller', *The Irish Press* 11 October, 1991.

The 1990s and early 2000s saw a continuation and expansion of the lunchtime season consisting of new Irish writing as well as European and American one-act plays and the production of professional scene study work for public performance. Lunchtime plays often transferred to evening performance and included *Rise and Shine* by Sean McCarthy (1990); *Hello Stranger* by Truman Capote (1991); *Time's Up* by Carmel Winters and Patrick McCabe and *Small Box Psychosis* by Barry McKinley (1992); and two seasons of Tennessee Williams one-act plays in 1995 and 1996 including *Talk to Me Like the Rain and Let Me Listen*, *Auto-da-Fé*, *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion*, *Something Unspoken* and *Suddenly Last Summer*.

*Naked Truth: An Evening of Scene Study* opened in June 1999 and consisted of scenes from *Little Malcolm and his Struggle Against the Eunuchs* by David Halliwell; *Kiss of the Spiderwoman* by Manuel Puig; *Skylight* by David Hare; *Hedda Gabler* by Henrik Ibsen and *The Lonesome West* by Martin McDonagh.

The last play Deirdre acted in was *The House of Bernarda Alba* by Federico García Lorca, which opened on 11 February 1999 at Focus Theatre. The play was a success for the theatre, running for nine weeks and was directed by Focus-trained actor and director Jayne Snow. The central part of *Bernarda Alba* was played by Deirdre O'Connell and all except one of the cast of ten actors trained at the Stanislavski Studio under her direction. In the production 'Deirdre O'Connell gives a towering performance as Bernarda – a shuffling monster of bitterness'<sup>42</sup> and 'creates an intelligent and credible performance in the title role'.<sup>43</sup>

A feature film documentary *Hold the Passion* was completed in 2000 by Focus Films, produced by Ann McRory and directed by Ronan O'Leary and premiered at the Cork Film Festival. The documentary was made to commemorate and pay tribute to the life and work of Deirdre O'Connell. It relates Deirdre's journey as artistic director as well as the history of the Focus Theatre and Stanislavski Studio, and contains unique footage of Deirdre's last performance in her role of Bernarda Alba as well as direct interviews with Deirdre and other artists of the Focus Theatre and Stanislavski Studio. Several public screenings have taken place at film festivals and at the IFI cinema in Dublin and the

<sup>42</sup> Emer O'Kelly, 'Lorca's Sexual Rage kept in a very clever Focus', *Sunday Independent*, 14 February, 1999.

<sup>43</sup> Gerry Colgan, 'The House of Bernarda Alba', *The Irish Times* 12 February, 1999.



makers of this excellent documentary are still waiting for it to be screened by Ireland's national television station RTÉ.

Deirdre O'Connell died suddenly at her home in Dartmouth Square in Dublin on June 10, 2001 'four years after Focus Theatre celebrated 'Thirty Years of Magic'.<sup>44</sup> Deirdre's funeral service was held in Whitehall Church on the northside of Dublin where, 36 years earlier, Deirdre had married Luke Kelly of the Dubliners. Following a service attended by several hundred people Deirdre was buried in Glasnevin Cemetery. Deirdre was an extraordinary human being and artist and she was mourned and missed by many friends and associates both personally and professionally.

Joe Devlin was appointed artistic director of Focus Theatre in 2002 and artists, including Tim McDonnell, Mary Moynihan, Paul Keely and Ann Maloney O'Driscoll, continued to provide training in the Stanislavski system of actor training.

Between 2001 and 2005 productions included *Tillsonburg* by Irish writer Malachy McKenna (2003) directed by Liam Heffernan, *Jesus Hopped the A-Train* by Stephen Adly (2004) directed by Joe Devlin, *Very Heaven* by Ann Lambert (2004) directed by Bairbre Ní Chaoimh; and *Proof* by David Auburn at Andrews Lane Theatre (2005) directed by Joe Devlin.

In 2004 Deirdre's sister and life-long friend, Geraldine O'Connell Cusack published her book *Children of the Far-Flung*, a 'true account of a remarkable Irish-American family, four generations of emigration and return, from Ireland to New York and back again. It is also the story of the author's sister, the late Deirdre O'Connell, founder and artistic director of the critically-acclaimed Focus Theatre in Dublin, her marriage to popular singer Luke Kelly, her successes and failures, and her remarkable and long-lasting impact on theatre in Ireland'.<sup>45</sup>

In 2006 the Focus theatre venue at Pembroke Place closed down on a temporary basis for refurbishment. For the next four years Focus productions were presented off-site in various venues throughout Dublin. In July 2006 Focus Theatre presented a number of successful productions including *Two Rooms* by American playwright Lee Blessing, directed by Mary Moynihan in Andrews Lane Theatre followed by *Mother Teresa is Dead* by Helen Edmundson, directed by

<sup>44</sup> [www.nli.ie/pdfs/mss%20lists/140\\_FocusTheatre.pdf](http://www.nli.ie/pdfs/mss%20lists/140_FocusTheatre.pdf), p.6.

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.amazon.com/Children-Far-Flung-Geraldine-OConnell-Cusack/dp/1904148336>.

<sup>45</sup> Focus Theatre website September 2012.



Joe Devlin at the Project Arts Centre. The following year Focus Theatre presented at the New Theatre and on tour, *Picasso's Women* by Brian McAvera, consisting of three monologues directed by the author, Mary Moynihan and Joe Devlin. In 2008 the theatre won the Writers Guild of Great Britain Award for the Encouragement of New Work for its production of *Picasso's Women*.

After four years off-site, the Focus Company returned to the Focus Theatre space on June 16, 2010, which was the date of Deirdre O'Connell's birthday. The theatre re-opened with a production of *The Tower* by +Joe Joyce, performed by founder member Tom Hickey and actor Bosco Hogan. New plays that year included the Irish premiere of *Tic* by Irish writer Elizabeth Moynihan (2010) and an Irish premiere of *Orphans* by Dennis Kelly (2010), produced by Smashing Times Theatre Company and Playleft Productions in association with Focus Theatre, and directed by Mary Moynihan. During the 2000s the Focus Theatre identified its artistic policy as having

a strong commitment to exploring contemporary international theatre practice. The Company's artistic policy is to present the best of contemporary world drama, to develop new plays, to produce world classics and to bring the theatre's work to as wide an audience as possible.<sup>46</sup>

It was during this period that Focus Theatre began to present a range of productions in association with other theatre companies including *Baglady* by Frank McGuinness, produced by Eska Riada in association with Focus Theatre (2010); *Stones in His Pockets* by Marie Jones, produced by Aisling Ghéar Theatre in association with Focus Theatre (2010); and *Hollywood Valhalla* by Aidan Harney (2012) produced by Purple Heart Theatre in association with Focus Theatre at Bewleys Café Theatre.

### Legacy

The Focus Theatre venue closed down in April 2012 due to cuts in arts funding. The company was no longer able to pay the rent due on the premises at Pembroke Place and the lights came down for the final time on Sunday April 29, 2012 after 45 years of making theatre. The final evening at Focus was marked by a reception at 7.30pm attended by the President of Ireland Michael D. Higgins and his wife Sabina Higgins and by invited past and present artists and friends of the Focus Theatre

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<sup>46</sup> Focus Theatre website September 2012.



along with members of the O'Connell and Kelly families representing the late Deirdre O'Connell and the late Luke Kelly. Sabina (nee Coyne) Higgins was one of the original founder members of Focus Theatre and both Sabina and Michael were long-time friends of Deirdre. Sabina was bridesmaid at Deirdre's wedding to the singer Luke Kelly. As supporters of the Focus Theatre, Sabina and Michael paid tribute to all those who had worked at Focus Theatre over the years. Following the reception a performance of *Hollywood Valhalla* by Aidan Harney was held.

Speaking at the reception on the last night, the President said we all owed Ms O'Connell a debt of gratitude because she brought 'the acting techniques developed by the foremost theorist of theatre in the 20th century, Konstantin Stanislavski, to Ireland...The introduction of these techniques was the primary purpose of her coming to Ireland...the result was a unique and invaluable contribution to the creative arts in Ireland'. He said that without the Focus Theatre, Irish people 'would have been deprived of access to some of the finest works that are important for an understanding of our humanity and the purpose of our human existence'.<sup>47</sup>

The Focus Theatre has played an invaluable role in Irish Theatre over the years, presenting over 300 plays, and the Stanislavski Studio has made a significant contribution by providing a unique training in the Stanislavski System to a large number of actors and directors. Many of Ireland's leading theatre and film artists started their careers at Focus Theatre. Gabriel Byrne made his debut in Focus in 1976 in a version of Turgenev's *A Month in the Country*.

Other leading actors and directors to have worked at Focus include Olwen Fouéré, Margaret Twomey, Joan Bergin, Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy, Bairbre Ní Chaoimh, Ena May, Jayne Snow, Tom Hickey, Johnny Murphy, Gerard McSorley, Tim McDonnell, Donal O'Kelly, Ger Carey, Eamon Hunt, Paul Raynor, Liam Halligan, Ken Harmon, Luke Hayden, Brent Hearne, Paul Keeley, Robbie McDowell, Michelle Manahan, Elizabeth Moynihan, Ann O'Driscoll, Paul Roe, Ann Russell-Weakly, and Mary Jude Ryan. President of Ireland Michael D. Higgins once said that Deirdre O'Connell was 'the single greatest influence in Irish Theatre since the 60s'.<sup>48</sup> The Focus Theatre has had a huge effect

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<sup>47</sup> Fiona Gartland, 'Final Curtain for Focus Theatre', *The Irish Times* 30 April, 2012.

<sup>48</sup> Kathy Donovan, 'Memories in the Focus', *The Irish Times Weekend Arts*, 25 July, 1992.

on Irish theatre, an influence as Irish actor and founder member of Focus Theatre Tom Hickey says is 'quite substantially hidden in strands of Dublin theatre'.<sup>49</sup> Speaking at the closing of the Focus Theatre Tom said, 'I don't know what is going to happen to Deirdre's ghost, because every time I come in here I imagine I'm going to see her walking out of the coffee room. Presumably she'll stay here'.<sup>50</sup>

It is not possible to talk or write about Focus Theatre without referring to Deirdre O'Connell who was the founder and driving force of the place. Deirdre always dressed in black, wearing several layers of black shawls providing an intriguing contrast with her flaming red hair. She carried a wooden clipboard with various scripts attached along with an assortment of black bags slung over her shoulder, containing more scripts, notes and papers and the occasional orange or gift she would spontaneously present to you when meeting. Most days she walked the short journey from her home in Dartmouth Square, gliding along the canal and down Leeson Street, turning onto Upper Pembroke Street and entering under the archway of Pembroke Place laneway to arrive at the nearby Focus Theatre where she spent the majority of her time.

I first heard about Focus Theatre from a friend in 1988. At that time there was a huge demand for places in the studio and no clearly-defined pathway or criteria for joining. Deirdre was a busy woman and sometimes did not follow traditional rules of doing business, such as answering phones or making appointments, unless it suited her. As a stranger approaching Focus, finding a way to contact Deirdre was often difficult and required persistence (perhaps Deirdre's way of seeing how passionate and determined you were!).

Another friend of mine encouraged me to approach Focus. He waited at the end of the laneway as I walked down it slowly towards the large black wooden door of the whitewashed Focus Theatre. As I was about to knock on the door my courage failed. I made to leave when suddenly a gust of wind blew the door open and a voice from the darkness cried out (entering Focus was like entering into Aladdin's Cave) 'Who's there? Come in'. It was a member of Focus, Jarlath Fahy; a group of actors were inside building the set for *A Question of Geography* by John Berger and Nella Bielski. I offered to help out

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<sup>49</sup> Peter Thompson, 'Method in their Madness, 21 Years of the Focus Theatre', *Theatre Ireland Retrospective* No 15, p. 34.

<sup>50</sup> Helen Donohue, 'Closure of the Focus Theatre', Interview with Tom Hickey, RTÉ News Report, April 26, 2012.



building the set and was then asked to help backstage, which I did. Each evening as Deirdre arrived into the theatre before the show started she would pass me by, a mysterious presence all in black, acknowledging my presence with a kind nod or gesture yet rarely speaking. When the lights came down on a performance at the end of each evening it was tradition to head to Houricans Pub on Lower Leeson Street, sometimes known as the 'Focus Office' (out of necessity as Focus Theatre was too small to house its own office space). One evening in Houricans during the last week of the run I was beckoned over to speak directly with Deirdre about my joining the studio and that was it. It was like being called into the inner sanctum and I was initiated.

Deirdre called core artists who worked full-time at Focus her 'family' and those who visited on a more infrequent basis 'cousins'. I moved swiftly into the heart of the family, acting and directing at Focus Theatre and making many friends that I still have today. It was like a creative commune. After ten years working at Focus Theatre I moved on, as many artists did, but you never really leave Focus and it never leaves you. Working with Deirdre was special.

Deirdre said she was always in mourning for her late husband, the singer Luke Kelly, who died in 1984, a few years after Deirdre and Luke had separated. Deirdre often spoke of Luke and for many years a picture of him hung in the Focus Theatre Green Room where Deirdre would sit perched on top of a high wooden stool surveying her tiny kingdom. Deirdre always remained close to, and received great support from, Luke's family, keeping in touch with Luke's brother Jimmy Kelly and the other family members.

With her extraordinary talent as an actor, director and teacher, Deirdre could easily have chosen to work elsewhere, however, despite the ongoing financial difficulties experienced by the venue, she chose to remain and dedicate her life to the Focus Theatre. Deirdre lived Stanislavski's maxim of 'loving the art in yourself, not yourself in the art' and was truly dedicated to seeking and portraying truth in performance. She had excellent insights into human behaviour and was a great communicator.

Deirdre was a genuinely rare human being, and offstage a very private person, sometimes to the point of reclusiveness. Whether performing in a show or not, most evenings Deirdre would arrive early into the Focus Theatre to check everything was in order. Everyone in Focus helped out, actors putting up posters or answering the phone during the day, studio members cleaning the space or serving teas and coffees in the evening. On occasion Deirdre was not slow in letting you



know her mind if something irked her particularly in relation to the preparedness of the theatre space before the audience arrived.

One evening I happened to be on the receiving end of one of Deirdre's rebukes not because of anything I had done but simply because I was the first person she saw when she arrived into the theatre. For some reason she was particularly fired up this evening, so I told her where to go in no uncertain terms, picked up my coat and bag and left. She immediately followed me out to the laneway to apologize and after that we got on like a house on fire. She was never having a go at the individual but simply fussing over the preparedness of her beloved theatre. Sometimes I wondered was she testing us to see what we were made of?

To those of us who knew Deirdre as a friend she was a warm and unique comrade and mentor, always willing to offer a helping hand. She was incredibly generous in sharing her insights and skills as an artist and teacher of the Stanislavski System and an interesting and unique individual to know. I worked on many productions with her and attended countless studios, and in rehearsal or performance she was always professional, courteous and courageous while offstage she maintained her creative eccentricity.

Deirdre consistently encouraged actors to develop their sensory apparatus and she herself was a very sensory woman. Physically she was thin and delicate, yet on and off stage, she had a powerful inner power and presence while also being incredibly vulnerable. Like all of us she was human and suffered her demons yet she followed her dream and has made a rare and unique contribution as an artist to countless individuals and to the world she lived in. I will always remember her with love and appreciation. Thank you Deirdre O'Connell.

Deirdre O'Connell

1939-2001

Founder of the Focus Theatre