

2014

Interview with Margaret Toomey

Mary Moynihan

Technological University Dublin, mary.moynihan@tudublin.ie

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/aacomusbk>



Part of the [Acting Commons](#), [Music Commons](#), and the [Other Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Moynihan, M. (2014) Interview with Margaret Toomey In S. Burch & B. McAvera (eds.) *Stanislavski in Ireland-Focus at 50*,(pp.68-85) Dublin, Carysfort Press.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Conservatoire at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Books/Book Chapters by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact arrow.admin@tudublin.ie, aisling.coyne@tudublin.ie, vera.kilshaw@tudublin.ie.

5 | Interview with actor Margaret Twomey

Mary Moynihan

Mary: Tell me how you became involved in Focus Theatre?

Margaret: I wanted to put on a play for Concern and I was looking for a small theatre in town. I was a Friend of Focus at that time. As a Friend, you could come to a rehearsal or a workshop so I thought I'd come down the lane and ask Deirdre if she would be prepared to rent the theatre to us, not knowing anything about Focus in that regard. Of course she said yes. But she also said 'you can have it for nothing'. I thought that was an amazing gesture because we were expecting to pay maybe Ir700-800 rent. In a way hers was probably the biggest contribution as we made about two thousand pounds.

We filled the theatre and had people queuing up Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Deirdre came along on Thursday but the space was booked out. The company wanted to try and make a place for her but she wouldn't hear of it. She insisted on making her own booking for Saturday and paying her own way in to her own theatre and I just thought that it said a lot about Deirdre. And not only that, but the studio people helped us to put up and paint the set. Everybody in the theatre was at our disposal. You got this sense when you came in that it was more than just a theatre; it was kind of a family as well. She came to see the play and then in the pub one night she asked me if I would like to come to her studio. That would have been about 1989 and I was there until Deirdre died in 2001. I wasn't there every single Saturday. Sometimes I might be in a show or there might be family things going on. I might be gone for maybe a couple of weeks or months and then I'd be back again. I suppose I was there twelve years.

Mary: The Stanislavski Studio was conducted by Deirdre at the Focus Theatre usually on Saturdays and Sundays and occasionally mid-

week, ranging in time from three hours to a full day. There was a format normally beginning with the deep muscle relaxation process, followed by abstract sound and movement and sensory exercises, followed by improvisations and prepared work. Many of the exercises were based on themes given by Deirdre such as a place, an active verb or an emotion. Can you describe your experience of the studio?

Margaret: I had to watch like everybody else, not for terribly long but for a couple of weeks. I sat in the audience and watched the exercises people were doing on stage, like *Justification of an Action*, *Personalization of an Object*, or character studies and the mirror exercises and I was just fascinated. On one particular Saturday she said to me that I could go up for an improvisation exercise called *Loggerheads* that started off with repeating a phrase, and then introduced abstract psychological sound. You talked but you didn't use identifiable sounds or real words. They were all abstract sounds that expressed where you were at, emotionally, in the moment. I thought abstract work was great because it brought you out of the head and you'd arrive at a place that you didn't plan or know was there, a place you'd never get to just by talking. I remember her asking me at the end of the exercise what I learnt in that exercise and I said I learnt that you had to listen more intently. Because you didn't have the words, you had to listen in a different way. She seemed pleased with that so she let me go up the next Saturday to take part in the studio.

There we would normally do the deep muscle relaxation process to start with and then Deirdre would give us a theme, maybe for abstract sound, and then we would explore the same theme through abstract movement and once the movement was established we would reintroduce the sound, so it seemed like you were building up an emotional vocabulary for the day. I remember exploring themes of places like Paris, Hawaii, and Beirut. Sometimes she gave us places I had never heard of but I worked with whatever the word evoked for me. She would sometimes give us verbs such as 'to fear'; it could be something you felt or something that was happening around you. She was very specific; you might do 'afraid' but then weeks later you might do 'to be afraid' which had a subtle difference.

She might give a phrase to use in *Loggerheads*, which she would say without any particular intonation such as 'why would you do that?' We would repeat that phrase back and forth to our partner until it developed into an improvisation on that theme. Somehow what went on in the earlier exercises was there as a residue when I went to do the improvisations, even though I now had a new theme to deal with. I

didn't find the improvisation too hard because I was already warmed up through the earlier abstract work, which had awoken the imagination and the emotional vocabulary. For some of the exercises such as the *Justification of an Action* or *Character Study* you could be up on the stage for forty minutes or an hour on your own with no words.

What I found really worked over time was the sensory work. We used to hold an imaginary object and work on it through the senses. It might be the dominant object from our abstract sound exercise, such as a ring or a bag or a shoe. You would explore the (imaginary) object, absorbing and understanding it through the five senses and then behaving with it. An orange couldn't be interesting because it was a round yellow object; you had to get down to its essence, which would be soft, juicy. You began to develop a language of the senses. I taught in Africa and I remember reading that nothing passes through the mind without having first passed through the senses. So I remember thinking at the time, this is a process, you know. If you don't go back to the senses do you fully experience the object? You had to move away from being intellectual once you started dealing with the senses, as it becomes an emotional experience.

There are two things that I always remember about studio. I was up on the stage a few weeks when Deirdre said to me 'I notice about you that when you're in an improvisation you don't actually put out your objective, you wait till the other person does, and then you seek to get your objective in and around their objective'. Now she was speaking solely in terms of drama. You can never have full drama if you don't have conflict and if you're not going to put out your objective you're not going to get that sense of conflict, and will never move to the next stage. Drama is all in the conflict and in the negotiation that happens when both people want to achieve their own objective.

I remember thinking at the time how profound this was because, even though she was talking about the principles of drama, I realized that was how I negotiate life. It never occurred to me that I wasn't directly asking in life for what I wanted, and I remember thinking this has to stop. That was the first glimpse I got into realizing I was not acknowledging myself, so how could I acknowledge a character?

Mary: What do you mean by acknowledging yourself?

Margaret: Sometimes it's not till someone reflects back something about you that you actually think about it. What I really learnt was that in life I tended to try and go around conflict rather than hit it head on: that was my way of negotiating life. I realized that when Deirdre said it. I learnt that, in drama and in life, if you're only going to go around

conflict you're never going to move to the next stage and develop the drama. If things are messy you've got to acknowledge that and then you have to negotiate a change or development. In dramatic terms we also learnt that there were many different ways of negotiating a conflict, including convincing or attacking, which weren't always aggressive.

Mary: It could be seductive.

Margaret: It could be anything. It taught you how to listen and hear and you were always encouraged to allow yourself to be affected by the other person's objective. It didn't mean that if I wanted to go to Cork and you wanted to go to Belfast I would keep saying 'No, I'm going to Cork'. I'd listen and ask 'Why do you want to go to Belfast?'. Is there anything in that for me. Is there any good reason why I should be swayed by your argument? So you learned all those skills. I know Deirdre always said this is not a therapy session and we must never use it as such, but you did learn a lot about yourself, and that helped you when you went to study characters.

Deirdre herself was extraordinarily perceptive. I don't think I ever met anyone who was as perceptive as her. So when somebody asked me why I liked Focus, why I kept going back I said, I thought it was because it actually set me free because I learnt about myself. I think most people one way or another found this about Focus. If you weren't truthful about yourself you weren't truthful on the stage and so in getting to some sense of truth about yourself you became free. You have to start by being honest with yourself.

I thought the other great part of her talent was her ability to feedback to you in a profound but simple way the very essence of your problem – the adjustment you needed to make to bring your performance to life. So I think when she said to me about not putting out my objective that was an amazingly useful thing because I possibly would have diluted the conflict in the drama because I wouldn't have realized what I was doing. She could get to the nub and the essence of your particular problem and it was different for everybody. She could see what was holding you, specifically, back. She was so profound in doing that.

I remember after my father died I went to Cork to visit a friend of my father's, who was in hospital. He said 'how do you feel?' and I said 'I think I feel like I am on a bomb site, like I am on a piece of land in Beirut or something'. He said nothing and then I went and spent a few weeks in West Cork and on the way back I went in to see him again and he said 'how's the bomb site?' I hadn't given it much thought and then I said 'oh, I think there's a dresser on it' (a piece of furniture so now it

was no longer barren as there were things coming back into the picture) and he said 'well, that's a start'.

Shortly after that I went into Focus and I don't remember exactly what the theme for the day was but Deirdre maybe said Beirut and the whole bomb site image came back. There were about ten of us onstage and in a flash I thought 'no, I'm not going there, I'm not exploring this here'. Then I heard from the depths of the theatre 'Don't disregard your first image Margaret, it might be useful'. I remember thinking 'How does Deirdre know, she's watching ten people, and the thought flashed through my mind in a fraction of a second'?

I am sure she knew everything about each one of us up on that stage, our weaknesses and strengths, but she never referred to them in a personal way. It was always about the creative process. That's what I liked – that great pursuit of the truth and the integrity behind it. It was always about the acting and the art of creation and to get us to go as deeply into it as we could. It was a unique experience, Focus, wasn't it?

Mary: She was very perceptive, it's like she could read your soul, and she could look inside and see what's going on. You never felt you were being exploited; you were vulnerable but you never felt in danger.

Margaret: Never, never, never. And you know that's why I was reading that poem to you, 'somewhere I have never travelled, gladly beyond' by e.e. cummings.

your slightest look easily will uncloset me
 though I have closed myself as fingers,
 you open always myself
 petal by petal as Spring opens
 (touching skilfully, mysteriously) her first rose

That poem says something about someone opening you skilfully and mysteriously and I thought that's what Deirdre did, that verse was so like what she did for people in studio. And then the closing verse, I thought that was 'Deirdre-speak': *I do not know what it is about you that closes and opens; only something in me understands.*

Mary: You mentioned abstract sound as part of the actor training. Abstract sound is expressive rather than realistic, it is non-literal. An abstract sound exercise at Focus was called 'Sounding into' where you are given a place or a word that you have to explore solely through abstract sound, to express your images and emotions only using abstract sound. For example, rather than expressing the conventional sound for weeping you are looking for a more primal, non-verbal sound to express what is going on. During the exercise you explore many

different non-verbal sounds and after a period of exploration you become aware of the pattern of sound, refining your sound down to two or three basic sounds that for you most describe the word you are exploring. Can you describe your journey in an 'abstract sound' exercise?

Margaret: I loved 'abstract sound', it was always something that brought me to a deeper place. If she gave you the theme you took it on, you tried to absorb it and then go with the first abstract sound that came into your head, but bearing the theme in mind. You often started tentatively but as you went on and allowed the sound to bring you somewhere else you suddenly realized it was becoming more intense, and that intensity brought you to a deeper place. The psychological sound is great because you can just keep going, it always builds and releases and builds, and you can keep going until you find what you need. In that sense it is easier for me to use psychological sound rather than psychological gesture. 'Abstract sound' wasn't bound by any rules of sound, that's how I understood it. It was something that you felt and you did your best to find a sound or sound pattern that would express how you felt. So if the theme was 'Paris' an image might come into your head of Cancan dancing and you find an abstract sound, it couldn't be music or dance, but you would try to find a sound that would give the rhythm or essence of what you were feeling and then that would bring you to somewhere else. The word and the sound created images. I used to get a series of pictures, maybe an image of the bridges of Paris, and then the people under the bridge, that might bring you to the poor of Paris, so while you might have started out with dance you might end up with something totally different. For me it worked when you got a rhythm that was repetitive and it said in some way 'Paris' to me through abstract sound. It kept me away from the head; it helped me to work through images through abstraction. It stopped me planning and reasoning.

Mary: Were the images you refer to personal or imaginary?

Margaret: Imaginative mostly. Some days it wouldn't be personal at all.

Mary: The exploration of the bombsite could be personal.

Margaret: Yes and I suppose that was an intense personal experience that I wasn't sure I wanted to explore there in studio. Because I had created a Beirut for myself before she gave it to me it was hard to bring my imagination entirely away from it. But what I found was, that even if the image was purely imaginative, somewhere it was embedded in your own emotions, your own emotional space, so I think

exploring an image is a kind of a mixture of the personal and imaginative.

Mary: After the sound exercises Deirdre might ask you to express the same place or word through abstract movement, as in a 'mirror exercise'.

Margaret: With Deirdre the mirror exercises mostly worked on a theme, you were trying to find the expression of the theme through your body moving abstractly in space, shaping the theme or emotion in space through body movement.

Mary: And of course the moving body is always creating images.

Margaret: Yes. It's pretty hard to keep images out of the work, it seemed to me.

Mary: Deirdre trained with Lee Strasberg who placed a strong emphasis on personal emotional memory work. What is your experience of the work at Focus?

Margaret: People say that Stanislavski is about recreating an emotion but I remember it as a much more active experience than dwelling on personal past emotion. Past emotions came up of course and sometimes that was a useful place to go if you were having a difficulty but you didn't always use it.

My memory of Deirdre was that, in relation to finding out about character, she liked you to do it through action rather than sitting round a table talking. If something was not working you would discuss it for a while but she preferred and encouraged you to solve it on your feet through action. If something was not clear to you then you would tease it out through improvisation or exercises rather than through a discussion. I think she thought action was where you found truth.

People sometimes think that the truth is telling it exactly as it is but Deirdre's truth was bigger than that, it was about knowing what was real for you, and acknowledging that...arriving at a truth in your performance. And knowing it was different for everybody...your truthful performance of a part may be different from mine. Acting was almost a spiritual thing for Deirdre, a sacred thing. I also think that her generosity with the gifts she had was amazing; she shared any knowledge she had with you. Whether we picked it all up or not is another question. I always thought it was awesome that, if you went to studio on a Saturday at two o'clock and you had work that you wanted her to look at, she'd stay till midnight if necessary to watch it and help you progress it. That was no problem to her as she was very generous with her talents and her time. And what did we pay - a small donation

which we threw into a basket, a pound or two, and if we had nothing that was ok too. Nobody knew.

She always came down the lane with all this black flying, and she looked like the most theatrical figure you could imagine and she'd talk to you in a theatrical manner and yet when she sat down to look at the work all that fell away and she became the most practical person you could imagine. Suddenly she would be focused, giving sensible, practical, down-to-earth understandable and deeply insightful direction.

Mary: Was it very difficult to get into the Focus Theatre?

Margaret: After Deirdre gave me the theatre for nothing (for the Concern show) I said to her at some stage that it was an amazing gesture because 'you knew nothing about me, about what I do'. And she said, 'I'm not infallible Margaret, but I'm seldom wrong about people'. And I wonder was that the key, you had to be there for what, in her book, was the right reason.

Mary: And that being?

Margaret: To develop your talent if you had it, to explore the work truthfully, to learn to communicate. There was no point going to Focus if you wanted a quick route to performance. People didn't join the Studio and find themselves on stage the next month no matter how talented they might appear to be. You had to learn the craft, have the perseverance to stay for what she expected of you. A lot of people will tell you that they sat for years watching studio before being asked to join. So you had to be there because you wanted to learn and you felt ready to learn.

Mary: How did you become involved in theatre yourself?

Margaret: When I was in school I went to drama classes with Eileen Hayes in the Fr Matthew Hall and I did pantomimes and the Feis Maitiu. I was from Dublin and went to national school in Glasnevin and then on to Scoil Caitriona where we did every subject through Irish. My mother was an Irish speaker originally from Donegal. She loved Irish culture and music and was always madly interested in drama. When we were kids she used to tell us stories and they turned out to be Shakespeare's stories. She didn't say much about Shakespeare but if she was telling us about *The Merchant of Venice* she would stop and say 'the quality of mercy is not strained'. She would say the speech for her own pleasure, because she loved it. When I went to secondary school I discovered that I actually knew Shakespeare and many of his stories. When we were kids we had one of those fold-up screens and my mother would have us putting on concerts for her. She would announce each

item saying, '...and the next item on the programme is a poem from...' or 'the next item is a song from...' She obviously loved drama herself and from a very early age she would bring me to the Abbey and the Gate, and we would listen to Radio plays on a Sunday night.

I continued doing classes and performed regularly but then I got married and went to Africa to work and when I came back I went to drama classes including three or four years with Betty Ann Norton and I acted locally until I went to Focus. I did a lot of work for an ex-Abbey actress, Lammy Baker, she invited me to take a part in a production with St. Thomas' Dramatic Society and I worked with them for many years while my children were small. I went from there to Focus. With St Thomas's we did two big plays a year and went to Drama festivals. We also organized drama workshops which I always attended.

In the early nineties I attended studio in Focus and was lucky enough to get a part sometimes. I also worked outside Focus with other theatre companies. In 1991 I became involved in the founding of Smashing Times Theatre Company with other artists I met through Focus Theatre including you, Mary. I was on the board of Smashing Times Theatre Company and also acted in professional productions presented by the Company including *End of Term* by Maeve Binchy, directed by Focus director Tim McDonnell, which went on a nationwide tour playing in all the major venues throughout Ireland and Northern Ireland. I continued working with Smashing Times Theatre Company and also with Focus Theatre and I still do today.

Mary: You have performed in film and television playing the part of Eileen Bishop in RTÉ's *Fair City* recently. You acted professionally at Focus Theatre during Deirdre's time. Can you talk about Marsha Norman's 1983 Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Night, Mother* presented by Focus Theatre in 1997 and directed by Deirdre? This was a two-hander and you played the mother, Thelma, and Elizabeth Moynihan played your daughter Jessie, a woman in her forties.

Margaret: *Night, Mother* opens with a mother at home settling down for the evening having her cup of tea when her daughter, Jessie, arrives in and tells her that she is going to take her own life that night. The mother tries to persuade Jessie not to do it. They talk about the past and their hurts. They talk about what life means to both of them and the mother says she doesn't care how mundane life is, she still wants to live and that Jessie should want to live also.

As a director Deirdre was very methodical. We did a lot of improvisation exercises before we actually went on to the text. We explored in our own words situations that would arise in the play as

well as exploring scenes based on the other characters mentioned in the text but who did not appear on stage. We also did the 'Character Study' exercise and I remember Deirdre saying that the character study exercises and improvisations were great because they would sustain us through the run.

Mary: The 'Character Study' or 'Character Private Moment' exercise used at Focus Theatre explores a significant event in the character's past life (that takes place prior to the play), the repercussions of which are felt in the actual script or text. You choose an event from your past life that is exceptional or formative, it impacts directly on the character in the actual play, and you explore this event by living through it. The actor is alone on stage and the exercise usually lasts thirty to forty minutes. The exercise has a structure with an action as the central heightened or climatic moment of the scene, and you develop a storyline based on your character's biographical details, which revolves around the carrying out of the central action. You justify how you work up to the central moment of the scene, building organically using the pyramid structure – the *before stage*, building up to the central action, the *during stage*, living through the central moment, the *after stage*, coming out the other side affected by what has happened. The climax of the piece should be a moment of revelation in relation to the key event or relationship for your character that you are exploring. You are alone onstage living through and within the fictional circumstances of the storyline. While the storyline is fictional, the component parts must be invested with special significance for the actor, for example the objects used can be personal and the events must be important to you. You set up the character's private space on the stage, a bedroom or sitting room where you are on your own, placing the personal objects and other required items in appropriate places, you position yourself within this private space, do a mini relaxation and then move into the exercise, going through the sequence of events that you have decided in terms of objects and activities and seeing where they bring you to.

Margaret: Mama in *Night, Mother* had a difficult relationship with her husband who is referred to in the play but does not appear, so I created a character study exercise based on the first few days of my marriage as a newlywed. My husband had gone away for the day and was due back shortly. I set the exercise in the sitting room/kitchen area of our home and I had bought myself a new outfit, a nice dress, lovely shoes and a nightdress. The items arrived from the shop all wrapped up and I opened them and tried them on and got myself ready, preparing dinner, setting the table, and I waited and watched for him to arrive

home. But he never came and at the heightened moment I undressed and hid the items away and I remember experiencing this huge sense of disappointment. When I started the character study exercise I had no idea where it was going but I could always remember that huge sense of disappointment I felt when I realized my husband was not coming home to me that evening; that he was not interested in me.

And in the play I had a monologue where I said I always felt I was a disappointment to my husband because I was too mundane, that he married a plain country woman and I was never more than that. When I did the monologue every night on stage I could still remember the disappointment I felt in the character study, it was always there, it was just there. Deirdre was right, it did inform the performance, and you didn't have to worry about being fresh because you actually had experienced in the rehearsal room the emotion that was called for in the play so it was always accessible to you right through the run. I never had to stop and wonder how will I deliver this speech, because you just knew how you stood with this man and it was there, so that was it. I understood this woman and her relationship to her husband, it came naturally to me. The residue from the emotion I experienced in the exercise was still there, so I didn't have to impose or colour the text too much myself; those sections where I referred to my husband just happened naturally. I loved when those scenes came up as you felt very secure in it, all you had to do was just tell the story, and you didn't have to impose or invest too much. Even today if I had to read that monologue I would remember the feeling. In that sense the exercises are great. If you have experienced it physically and emotionally, then the whole performance is much richer than if you have just worked it out in your head.

The other thing I remember was that Deirdre started at page one of the script and she had worked out how much time she was going to spend on each section. We came in with our lines learned for the particular section we were working on that day. We might do improvisations if we were having difficulty with the text. If you weren't sure about the dialogue when you came in, by the time you went home that evening I can assure you, you knew the script. Then we got a new section of text to work on for the next day and before we began work on the second section we ran the section we had worked on the previous day. The next day we ran through the first and second section before beginning work on the third and so on. She was very methodical about it, building up to a climax so she didn't do difficult sections of text until we had worked through the earlier bits. She had a very definite

rehearsal plan. We teased out the script as we went along. If we were having difficulty she might do an improvisation or an acting exercise. The exercises were chosen to help solve a problem or build on something; if the text was working there was no need to do exercises.

When I think about Deirdre now I remember how, if you were acting, she treated you as a precious object and if people came in to the theatre while you were working she would say 'don't disturb the actors'. She was extraordinarily respectful and helpful to actors. The communication was wonderful. I remember her laughter. She was great fun at times. I can still hear her laughter...and the parties. But in a strange sort of way she was very retiring, she was very private. She never made herself very public outside the theatre or outside the people that she worked with.

Mary: Why do you think that was?

Margaret: Focus was very successful in the early days and I think there was talk about it becoming a bigger theatre. But I think at heart Deirdre was a teacher. She was an artist and a teacher and she said she knew she was a great communicator. She could only do the work she was interested in if Focus remained small. She loved having her studio and teaching people, and also acting and directing. She always said actors should be trained in a living theatre. It was a great privilege for an actor to be trained in Focus Theatre, to work backstage, on lighting, or front of house, sweeping the stage, working in the coffee shop and attending the classes, knowing how the whole theatre works. And I think Deirdre liked to teach that way, and she could only do that in a small space. She didn't appear to want to be a star; she liked the space she had created for herself to work in.

Mary: Can you tell me about your memories of acting with Deirdre in *The House of Bernarda Alba* by Federico Garcia Lorca directed by Focus actor and director Jayne Snow in 1999. Among the cast of ten women you played Poncia and Deirdre played Bernarda Alba.

Margaret: I remember seeing her script and it was marked in all different colours, sections in red, green, blue and I think the colours meant something to her about the different colours or emotions in the dialogue. I think she had marked her script in different colours to indicate changes in the dialogue. During rehearsals Deirdre took part in all the Stanislavski exercises we did with Jane including the 'character study' exercise. I remember one thing about her character study. At the end of the exercise she was on stage standing up straight with her two arms stretched out very wide on either side and she was distressed and I wondered why she was doing that, holding that stance with the arms

stretched out wide and she also had an object, a silver cup that was significant and had belonged to her husband.

When we came to performance there is a point in the play where the daughters are fighting and Deirdre, as Bernarda, knows that things are breaking down. I was on stage with Deidre and all her daughters and she orders them all to leave saying 'I saw the storm coming but I didn't think it'd burst so soon. O what an avalanche of hate you've thrown on my heart! But I'm not old yet – I have five chains for you and this house my father built, so now even the weeds will know of my desolation. Out of here!' She sent them all away and I was left on stage with my back to Deirdre and she had a line saying 'I'll have to let them feel the weight of my hand! Bernarda, remember your duty'. At that point I turned round to see her after she spoke that line and whatever way she was sitting and whatever expression was on her face, she actually looked like someone who felt like she was being crucified, it was like she didn't wish to do this thing but it was her duty, she had this weight of crucifixion on her.

And then I remembered her stance from the character study exercise when she was standing with her arms out because there was a sense of crucifixion in that, she looked like a cross. I didn't understand when she was doing the actual exercise but now in the play there was that sense of crucifixion again, it was like the agony in the garden, it had a biblical connotation and I remembered the silver chalice: it had all come together in a biblical sense. It was her 'psychological gesture'. She saw Bernarda Alba as being crucified by her social position and society around her, that she had to behave that way. She had explored and experienced that in her character study exercise.

She was the only actor I ever saw playing Bernarda Alba who was strict, domineering and in charge yet had that huge vulnerability underneath it; she still maintained the femininity and sexuality while being domineering and you could still see her pain. You don't often see that.

She was lovely to play with, it was almost impossible to not have a response because what she gave was so clear, direct and engaged, she had that capacity to focus and deliver with such clarity. Every single night before the performance, you arrived in early to prepare and she would call you over to her corner in the dressing room and run lines. She never missed that.

Mary: Can you tell me about your work on creating public improvisations at Focus?

Margaret: One of the most exciting experiences I had in Focus – and you were part of it as well Mary – was when we did the improvisation play on a Sunday night for Deirdre’s family who were gathered in Ireland for a genealogical get-together, people from America, Australia, New Zealand. They were hoping to see a play at Focus Theatre but there was no actual production on at the time so Deirdre decided we would do an improvisation play. To start the improvisation she gave us the dilemma and situation, she didn’t give us a character. We were all working down the country in a large house where we were running a place, a sort of Rehabilitation Centre for young people who had been in trouble with the law. A farmer had provided the house on loan and apparently someone had gone out one night and killed some of his livestock and the farmer believed it was someone from our group. The farmer said the person responsible had to be found and sent away otherwise he would no longer give us the use of the house and the project would close. So that was the dilemma we had to solve amongst ourselves – were we idealists or were we prepared to compromise. In addition to the dilemma there were personal relationship problems that arose between the characters in the course of the improvisation. In rehearsal a lot of us wanted to keep the young person who had committed the crime and then as we rehearsed some people changed sides to achieve a better balance. We continued to rehearse, creating a shape to the improvisation. What worked well was ensuring that when two or three people were arguing out a point within the improvisation everybody else was to watch and listen. One person would raise an issue and that would be explored fully and others listened, then when that had climaxed, someone else would pick up a point and run with that and so on. At no given time would everybody on stage be talking at the same time.

We performed to a full house and it worked very well. The audience were enthralled and said they believed they were watching something real happening on stage. Obviously the performance was not a repetition of the run through we had. We had a sense of each other and we were clear on the dilemma, but it wasn’t all about the dilemma. For example, if one actor said something that sparked off a personal dilemma we would end up with a personal conflict that was acted out within the wider conflict and of course there was plenty of comedy.

That was an amazing experience, to do a two-hour improvisation show and no script. Normally backstage you have the comfort of the script as you wait to go on but you didn’t have that crutch, you just sat there with nothing and you went out on stage to a full house. When you

were out there you had no idea where it is going to go. It was a very disciplined and structured performance, it was excellent.

Mary: What have you taken from Focus Theatre in relation to creating a performance on stage?

Margaret: When I get a script I read it a number of times. At first you get just an impression. Then you examine the script. You may hit moments that are more meaningful than others. So I might start there, why is that moment meaningful and then continue exploring through character studies or improvisations.

When the character study exercise works it carries you right through the performance particularly when you are in a long run. Sometimes during this exercise things come out that you have subconsciously absorbed from the script but may not be consciously aware of but are released through the physical playing out of the exercise. Improvisations are great for filling out what is implied in the script but not actually said. But you don't often get a chance to do that kind of work. I also enjoy doing impulse work, which I do with you Mary and I find that great, I like that.

Sometimes you get a part and you just instinctively understand the spirit of the person and you don't have to think about how you are going to play it, it just happens in rehearsal. When it clicks or is truthful, that is when you just 'get' the character, you get the woman or the spirit of the person, she starts to speak for you, through you.

Mary: What do you mean by the 'spirit' of the person?

Margaret: I suppose their energy; it comes from somewhere or it may be their voice, or a gesture that captures them. If the person jumps off the page it is easy. If that doesn't happen I might take the script and explore the physical behaviour or actions, what am I doing here, or the physical image of the person and see where that takes me, using abstract psychological sound or movement. I may also work on defining clear and specific objectives related to the other person and also explore what my 'need' is (I want something but why do I want it?, what need is in me?) maybe for every line or paragraph. I work it out and then forget about it and try to work on instinct.

Generally speaking I learn the lines, I have to know them 200 per cent and then wait for the instinct to come but you always know if what you are doing is empty. You always know when you are just saying the lines and there isn't enough behind them or underneath them. You know when it is working and when it is not. A sense of truth is when the words have a depth that isn't on the page and when you find that depth you know you are hitting the right note. To get truth I find I have to

have images in my head, really clarified and specific. They can be still images or moving. I try to visualize specifically all that is happening in the scene, fill in all the detail, rather than just generalizing, and to connect emotionally with the other person. I like to paint the pictures for myself; I like to work on images as I learn the script. You need to look for all the different colours that are in a character; nobody is just one colour; you need to find the different shades, and if the script is good the shades are in the script. In terms of different colour, exploring irony within the text can be good and I often read or re-read acting books to stimulate ideas. What I am looking for is to get underneath the script to the point where it really doesn't matter what words you say. The words are important because they give meaning but then you have to go for the emotion that is there and is found inside yourself. It is not so much the words you say that is important. What goes on between the characters is what is important. I think talking to create character is not the most helpful approach. I'm always looking for an action rather than to talk or write about it. The relationships and the choices you make as that character are such an important part of preparation for me.

Mary: To finish, what final word would you like to say about Focus Theatre and Deirdre's legacy?

Margaret: For me the exciting thing about Focus was that it did not matter whether you became an actor or not. Nobody came to Focus and went out the way they came in. Everybody left Focus different. Because, under Deirdre's direction, everybody was trained as an individual. She saw the strengths and weaknesses in different people and she built on them. She taught you to reflect on yourself and learn about yourself and move on. So even if people did not become actors, they left with more skills than when they first came in.

Mary: What kind of skills?

Margaret: They grew within themselves and got the confidence to be themselves and present themselves to the world as they were. You saw people develop. They left different because they had been given the freedom to explore. Deirdre saw the areas which they could develop. I think that was her special skill. She was so perceptive and had a great capacity to feed back what she had observed clearly, in a meaningful way to you. I thought that was fantastic.

Deirdre knew exactly what she was doing, her vision was very clear, she wanted a theatre and studio where she could train actors in a 'living theatre' and to present classics that maybe wouldn't see the light of day. She liked American and European classics, it was a kind of 'classic' theatre. She didn't do much experimental theatre. That's not to say she

didn't like other kinds of theatre but that was for someone else to do. It seemed to me that she liked plays with stories, narratives, and rich relationships.

As for the future? Deirdre taught the Stanislavski system. She perfected that. She worked with a system she knew really well, and she specialized in it. It is a different Focus now, people work in other ways, styles of acting move on through the decades, and scripts are written with different demands. I don't know if the studio will stay rooted in Stanislavski. Focus may explore other methods but I hope it will always produce work that is truthful, spontaneous, brave and exciting. I wish the theatre the very best in the future.

Sarah's Introduction

At the bottom of a lake in the heart of London, a kind of water...
 Deirdre O'Connell was...
 New York in the early years...
 disappointed...
 brother shortly after her passing...
 can explain the...
 simply...
 swans...
 never arrived at an answer...
 mental...
 fully...
 mystery.

At the time of her arrival in London...
 not...
 United States...
 Ireland...
 New York...
 move back to Ireland...
 her family...
 the...
 studio...
 Life...
 trained...
 theatre...
 could hold on to the beautiful...