

## **Siobhán McKenna**

McKenna, Siobhán (1922–86), actor and theatre director, was born 24 May 1922 at 28 St James's Park, off the Falls Road, Belfast, Co. Antrim, the second daughter of Margaret (Gretta) O'Reilly from Loch Gamhna, Co. Longford, and her husband, Eoghan McKenna (b. Millstreet, Co. Cork, 1892) lecturer in mathematical physics at the Municipal College of Technology, Belfast. McKenna and her elder sister, Nancy (b. 1919), received their early schooling at the Dominican convent, Falls Road, Belfast.

In 1928 Eoghan McKenna moved his family to Fort Eyre at Shantalla, Co. Galway, when he was appointed lecturer (later professor) in mathematical sciences at UCG.

Irish was the language of the McKenna household. Siobhán Ní Mhainín from Ballyferriter, Co. Kerry, lived with the family while studying for her degree in Irish. McKenna also became fluent in Connemara Irish.

Her formal education, at Dominican College, Taylor's Hill, Co. Galway, was interrupted by a year's confinement to bed with glandular fever. She then enrolled at the boarding school of the St Louis Sisters at Monaghan, where she developed her love of drama. While still a university student, at UCG, McKenna acted leading roles at the Taidhbhearc, Galway's Irish-language theatre, playing in the Irish version of Evans and Valentine's *Tons of money* ('Dalladh airgid') in March 1941, in Jean-Jacques Bernard's *Le National Six* ('Ar an mBóthar Mór', translated by Professor Liam Ó Briain and in her own translation of J. M. Barrie's *Mary Rose*. She played in an Irish version of Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* and in two plays by Sean O'Casey, 'Shadow of a gunman' and 'The plough and the stars'.

She graduated BA from UCG with first class honours in Irish, French, and mathematics in 1943, and enrolled at UCD for postgraduate studies in French. Ó Briain is credited with bringing McKenna's talent to the notice of Ernest Blythe, managing director of the Abbey Theatre, who having auditioned McKenna offered her a contract.

McKenna began at the Abbey with Irish-speaking parts in Peadar Ó hAnnracháin's 'Stiana' (March to April 1944), followed by 'Sodar i ndiaidhna n-uasal', Blythe's translation of Molière's *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* (21 May 1944). She was noticed favourably for her playing of a Belfast factory girl in 'The end house' by Joseph Tomelty (August 1944), and her role as Jimín, a pert newsboy, in the Gaelic pantomime, 'Muireann agus an prionnsa' (26 December 1945 through January 1946), was acclaimed by the Evening Herald critic as 'a performance of inexhaustible vitality'. 1946 was a decisive year in McKenna's career and life. F. J. McCormick the great Abbey actor, tutored her when she played opposite him in 'Village wooing' by Shaw; and when she received favourable notices for a small part in the British film *Hungry Hill* he advised her not to abandon her stage career for one in film. In September 1946 McKenna married the actor Denis O'Dea; their only child, Donnacha, was born in August 1948.

McKenna first appeared on the London stage on 3 March 1947 at the Embassy Theatre as Nora Fintry in 'The white steed' by P. V. Carroll (qv). She played Maura Joyce in Sir Laurence Olivier's production of Jean Anouilh's 'Fading mansions' at the Duchess Theatre (31 August 1949); Olivier, too, counselled her to remain in theatre work when she was offered a Hollywood contract for her memorable performance in the Paramount film *Daughter of darkness* (1948). Theatre critics J. C. Trewin and Kenneth Tynan commented on her stage presence in James Forsyth's 'Héloïse'

(1951), Trewin describing her as 'an actress of vision who can be as poignant in her silences as in her speech' and Tynan remarking on her 'pallor and intensity'.

In response to a request from the Taidhbhearc, McKenna offered to play the lead in her own translation of Shaw's *Saint Joan*. A sensational success, it played to packed audiences first in Galway, in December 1950, and for one performance at the Gaiety in Dublin, 14 January 1951. Micheál MacLiammóir (qv), who was in the audience, invited McKenna to play *Saint Joan* in his production of the play, which opened at the Gate Theatre, Dublin, on 18 November 1954 to rave reviews. She also played the role in an English production in London in September 1954, at the Arts Theatre and then at the St Martin's Theatre; she won the Evening Standard award for her acting. She played *Saint Joan* again in 1956–7 in Paris and then in New York, where with her unfamiliar Hiberno-English accent she took Broadway by storm.

In 1956 she was the first Irish actor to win a Tony award. During the same years McKenna, with Shelah Richards directing, created a new Pegeen Mike in 'The playboy of the western world' by J. M. Synge, first in 1951 at the Edinburgh Festival and then in July 1953 at the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin, with the actor–manager Cyril Cusack playing Christy Mahon, in what was deemed a superb production; it went on a European tour, and charmed Parisian audiences at the Sarah Bernhardt Theatre. In 1960 Richards revived the play for the Dublin Theatre Festival and for the Florence Festival, where McKenna was given the 'best actress' award.

In 1961 Brian Desmond Hurst directed McKenna in the film production of *The playboy of the western world*.

For international audiences *Saint Joan* is considered McKenna's outstanding role; in Irish theatre history she is best remembered for redefining the role of Pegeen Mike. McKenna, a fine Shakesperian actor, spent a season at Stratford-on-Avon in 1952. She played a captivating Viola in 'Twelfth night', directed by Sir Tyrone Guthrie at the Stratford Festival in Ontario in 1957, and a one-woman Hamlet in the manner of Sarah Bernhardt off Broadway in 1957, which critics panned; but her *Lady Macbeth*, opposite Jason Robards, at Harvard University in 1959 was of star quality, 'putting in the greatest mad scene seen in the U.S. since Callas's *Lucia di Lamermoor*' (Time). Loyalty to the Irish stage brought her back to Ireland, and in 1960 she made Dublin her permanent home: the family lived on Highfield Road, Rathgar, first at no. 23 then, when O'Dea's health declined, in a smaller house at no. 78. From then on McKenna steadfastly pursued the aims of an Irish national theatre, in keeping with the vision that inspired the Abbey's founders. The establishment of Irish television in 1961 brought her into wider contact with the Irish public.

The dramatic revival of the 1960s in Ireland owed much to the founding of the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1957, which introduced a new generation of Irish dramatists to a theatre-going public. Exile, emigration, and homecoming for the economically deprived were themes that interested both writers and their public. McKenna's engagement with the folk plays of Michael J. Molloy included financial backing, directing, and acting (*Daughter from over the water*, 1964) and gave McKenna the impetus to direct and introduce new forms of stagecraft. In 1966 she played Juno with Peter O'Toole and Jack MacGowran in 'Juno and the paycock' at the Gaiety

Theatre, Dublin. At the 1967 Dublin Festival, which coincided with the reopening of the Abbey Theatre, she gave a magnificent performance as the broken-down, earthy Cass in Brian Friel's 'The loves of Cass Maguire'. At the 1968 Dublin Festival at the Abbey she and Cyril Cusack starred in Anton Chekhov's 'Cherry orchard', directed by Madame Knebal from the Moscow Art Theatre.

For more than a decade McKenna had been considering a one-woman show on the lines of MacLiammóir's 'I must be talking to my friends'. When Wolf Mankowitz and Laurence Harvey put up the money for a West End production, with Sean Kenny as designer and director, McKenna set about creating her show, choosing her pieces with consummate skill. Here are ladies played in Britain, North America, Australia, Ireland, and Vienna throughout the 1970s. Her Molly Bloom and stream of consciousness Anna Livia Plurabelle passages from James Joyce were a tour de force that brought audiences to their feet. She gave sixty-seven public performances and as many more at university venues. During the 1970s McKenna directed fifteen plays, taking over O'Casey's 'Juno and the paycock' at the Mermaid Theatre in London in 1973 on the sudden death of Sean Kenny. In Toronto she directed a season of Synge plays later that year. Although she concentrated on directing plays by O'Casey and Synge in the 1970s, she continued to act: she played Bessie Burgess in the Abbey's golden jubilee production of 'The plough and the stars' in 1976, which toured New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington DC. In the mid 1970s McKenna formed a small company, Quest Productions, with John Hippisley as manager-director. She directed and played in Eugene O'Neill's 'A moon for the misbegotten' at the Gate in 1975.

In 1977 she played Sarah Bernhardt in 'Memoir' with Niall Buggy, in Eric Salmon's production at the Olympia theatre in Dublin, the Ambassador in London, and briefly in Canada; the production was an artistic success but a financial failure. Quest Productions presented 'Here are ladies' and, with McKenna directing, O'Casey's 'The shadow of a gunman' in Vienna 1980–81. While McKenna was directing a season of one-act Irish plays in London, Denis O'Dea died 5 November 1978. The following year her own health began to fail but McKenna continued her hectic programme, appearing as Juno in Joe Dowling's production of 'Juno and the paycock' at the Abbey in 1979, as Agrippina in 'Britannicus' at the Lyric, Hammersmith, London, in 1981, and in 'All Joyce' at the Abbey Theatre in 1982. In 1984, as well as directing and stage-managing Brian Merriman's 'Cuir an mheán-oiche', she played a luminous Mary Tyrone in Eugene O'Neill's 'Long day's journey into night' for the Abbey. The following year she and Maureen Potter played the two old ladies in 'Arsenic and old lace' with verve at the Gaiety in Dublin. Though seriously ill, McKenna undertook the demanding role of Mommo in Tom Murphy's 'Bailegangaire', which he had written with her in mind. Directed by Gary Hynes, it played at the Druid Theatre in Galway from December 1985 through January 1986, transferring to the Donmar Warehouse in London for the spring of 1986, and to the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin, for a two-week run. Murphy's drama is set in a cottage in the west of Ireland where a senile grandmother, Mommo, strives to tell her two granddaughters a story which she cannot finish. The production was a rare conjunction of director, actors, staging, and play. McKenna's contribution became a

legend.

On 16 November 1986 McKenna died of cardiac arrest after a lung operation in the Blackrock clinic in Dublin. She was buried at Ragoon cemetery in Galway. During her lifetime she received many honours: life membership of the Abbey Theatre (1966) and of Irish Actors' Equity (1970), honorary doctorates from the NUI, TCD, University of Ulster at Coleraine, and several American universities. She was awarded the Eire Society of Boston gold medal in 1971. In 1975 President Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh nominated her to the council of state, an appointment continued by his successor President Patrick Hillery.

Active in human rights, on 19 March 1982 McKenna addressed the United Nations special committee against apartheid in New York by invitation; she revealed that she and Dame Peggy Ashcroft were among a group of actors, members of Actors' Equity, who had signed a declaration not to perform in South Africa until there was an end to apartheid.

Fearless in confrontation, she took a libel case against The Observer over an article written by the then editor, Conor Cruise O'Brien, accusing her of anti-Semitism because of a careless remark she once made on New York television.

At her graveside playwright Brian Friel declared:

'For people of my generation, she personified an idea of Ireland.' McKenna was preeminent among the players who brought the dramatic works of the Irish literary revival to the national and international stage in the second half of the twentieth century.