

An Abbey Theatre Production



# THE COUNTRY GIRLS

WRITTEN AND ADAPTED BY EDNA O'BRIEN  
DIRECTED BY GRAHAM MCLAREN

**EDUCATION PACK**

WRITTEN BY SAOIRSE ANTON



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# SYNOPSIS

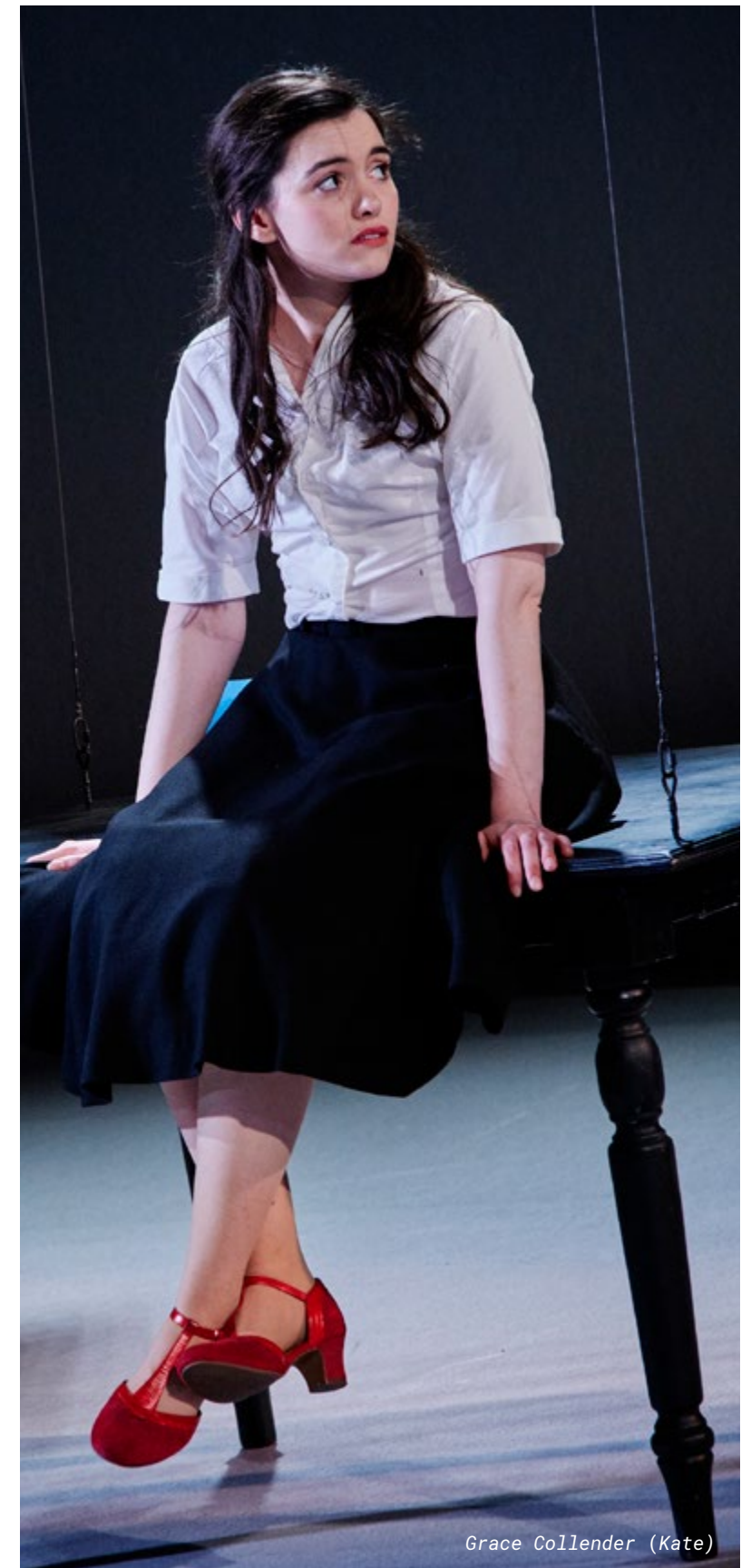
Set in the late 1940s and early 1950s, *The Country Girls* (adapted from the novel of the same name by Edna O'Brien), centres around two friends, Caithleen (Kate) Brady and Baba Brennan. *The Country Girls* is a classic coming-of-age story, in which the two characters navigate both their friendship and their own individual paths.

## ACT ONE

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Act One opens at Kate's home in a rural town in the west of Ireland where she and Baba grew up. In the first few scenes we are introduced to Kate (Kate), her mother Lil, her alcoholic father Malachi, Baba, and Hickey who works on Kate's family farm. We get an impression of Kate and Baba's friendship and of Kate's family life over the course of a morning. Once Kate and Baba arrive at convent school, they receive the news that Kate has won a scholarship to attend St. Edna's school, where Baba will also be studying. Kate is thrilled by the news, and is excited to share the news with her mother. However, when Kate returns from convent school, she is greeted by Hickey who bears the bad news that her mother is missing. She had been crossing the lake with Tim Hanran in his boat when it sank. Though Hickey has simply said that her mother is missing, when Baba tells Kate that she is to stay with them, and Mr Gentleman, Mr. Brennan and the Sergeant enter it becomes clear to Kate that her mother has drowned.

Despite the tragedy, life continues and the girls leave to start their studies at St. Edna's. Before they leave, Kate receives a book from Mr. Gentleman, and the audience receives their first inkling of the nature of Mr. Gentleman's feelings for Kate. Kate and Baba do not settle easily into life at the convent with Sister Immaculata's strict rules. In her loneliness Kate revisits happier times, a trip to Limerick with Mr. Gentleman. Despite her initial isolation, Kate begins to make friends with a nun, Sr. Mary, and she excels in her studies. It is soon time for the Christmas holidays, and Kate and Baba return home. The girls are enjoying their first night at home; they are sharing mince pies and Kate is trying on her new red suede high-heels when Mr. Gentleman arrives for a visit. He and Kate plan a trip to Limerick over Christmas. The following evening, he gives her a present of a watch and asks her not to tell anyone where it came from.



Grace Collender (Kate)

After Christmas Kate and Baba return to the convent, but not for long as Baba concocts a plan to write an explicit note about Sr. Mary on the back of a holy image to get them expelled. As expected, Sr. Immaculata sends the girls home, to the shame and anger of their parents. The Brennans are angry, but Mr. Brennan suspects that Baba had a heavier hand in the plan than Kate. However, Kate's father is not so forgiving and arrives home from the pub in a roaring fury and tries to force her to come home with him but both Mr. Brennan and Kate rebuff him. Realising that they will not be going to another school, Kate and Baba decide to move to Dublin.

## ACT TWO

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Act Two opens in Dublin, where Kate and Baba are chasing their new life as young women. They move into a boarding house owned by a dramatic German landlady, Joanna. While Kate plans to study and work in Dublin, Baba's plans revolve around rich men, fast cars, good meals and nights dancing. As usual Kate is caught up in Baba's plans and agrees to go on a double date that Baba has set up for them with two rich, but unpleasant, merchants. From the start Kate does not enjoy the night as her date is brash and tries to get her to have sex with him though she does not want to. She and Baba leave, (though not before Baba lifts some perfume and a silver hairbrush from her date's wife's dressing table). When they return to the boarding house, Mr. Gentleman is waiting outside. He and Kate talk and the scene transitions to another day at the seaside at Clontarf where they explore their feelings for each other and their future, but leave on an ambiguous note.

When Kate comes back from her walk with Mr. Gentleman, she finds Baba packing to go to Killarney with Reg, the merchant she had been on the date with. While Baba goes to Killarney, Kate speaks to Joanna and decides to end her relationship with Mr. Gentleman. She tells Baba when she returns from Killarney, but Baba is preoccupied with packing her remaining belongings to leave the boarding house. Kate is shocked and saddened by Baba's decision to leave, feeling that it is the end of their friendship.

A few days later Mr. Gentleman visits Kate at the boarding house and asks her to go to Vienna with him. Floating on air, Kate makes preparations to leave. However, when she goes into town to meet Mr. Gentleman she is met with disappointment as he does not arrive. Instead she spends the night with Finn, a poet she met while waiting. When she returns home her difficulties are far from over as her father has heard of her affair with Mr. Gentleman and has come to take her home. In an unprecedented evolution, Kate stands up to him and refuses to go, instead announcing that she is moving to England. Mr. Gentleman tries to dissuade her from leaving, but Kate is determined. At the last minute, as Kate is about to leave, Baba joins her on the boat and the two friends set off on the next chapter of their adventure.



Grace Collender (Kate)



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## CHARACTER PROFILES

# KATE BRADY

Kate (Kate) is one of the central characters in the play. She starts the play as a young, uncertain teenager, but over the course of the story she begins to discover herself and find her feet in the world. The death of her mother, her friendship with Baba, her affair with Mr. Gentleman, and her experiences in Dublin all change her perspective on herself and the world around her.



Grace Collender (Kate) and  
Steven McCarthy (Mr. Gentleman)





Lola Petticrew (*Baba*) and Company

## CHARACTER PROFILES

# BABA BRENNAN

Baba is Kate's best friend (and sometimes worst enemy!) Despite their competitive and antagonistic relationship early in the play, following the death of Kate's mother the two girls are thrown together into what later becomes a close friendship. Baba is the more outgoing and bold of the two girls, she tends to be the one to lead Kate into schemes, like her plan to get them both expelled from the convent, and the double date with Reg and Harry. She is determined to live her life as fully as she can and have as much fun as possible while doing so.



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## CHARACTER PROFILES

# MR. GENTLEMAN

Gerhardt Gentleman is a neighbour of Kate and Baba's. Not originally from the area, he is a reserved character, who lives with his wife outside the village. From early on in the play we get the impression that he is fond of Kate when he comforts her after her mother's death, but it is only later, after Kate and Baba come back from St. Enda's that their relationship becomes romantic. Though he pursues a relationship with Kate, he is still married and ends up hurting himself, his wife and Kate through his actions.



Grace Collender (*Kate*) and  
Steven McCarthy (*Mr. Gentleman*)





Aidan Kelly (*Malachi*),  
Grace Collender (*Kate*) and Lisa Lambe (*Lil*)

## CHARACTER PROFILES

# MALACHI

Malachi is Kate's father. He has a drinking problem and has made life difficult for Kate and her mother with his unpredictable moods and violent temper.

# LIL

Lil is Kate's mother. Kate has a close, loving relationship with her. We do not get to know her character for very long as she drowns while crossing the lake, but it is clear that she is the grounding, caring force within their turbulent home.



## CHARACTER PROFILES

# HICKEY

Hickey works on the Brady's farm. He is a good friend to Kate and helps her to deal with her father's alcoholism. However, after Lil's death he moves to find work in England.

# MR. BRENNAN

Mr. Brennan is Baba's father and the local vet. He is a caring man who looks out for Kate after her mother's death.



The company of Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls*





Catriona Loughlin (Sister Mary)  
and Grace Collender (Kate)

## CHARACTER PROFILES

# SISTER MARY

Sister Mary is a nun who befriends Kate at St. Enda's, hides her copy of *Dubliners* for her to keep her out of trouble and helps her to find her feet. She did not want to become a nun but after her mother contracted cancer she vowed to take holy orders if her mother survived. She later suggests that Kate becomes a nun so that they could be "Brides of Christ together." However, their friendship does not survive as Baba writes an explicit note about Sr. Mary with her and Kate's names on it to get them expelled from St. Enda's.

# JOANNA

Joanna is Kate and Baba's landlady in Dublin. She often despairs at their actions, but is kind-hearted and offers advice to them both at different times.



The Company of Edna O'Brien's  
*The Country Girls*



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## CHARACTER PROFILES

# REG AND HARRY

Reg and Harry are two wealthy, married, businessmen who Kate and Baba go on a double date with. Kate does not continue a relationship with Harry as he is unpleasant and treats her with little respect. Baba continues to date Reg for some time, and even decides to go away with him.

# FINN

Kate meets Finn after Mr. Gentleman stands her up. He is a poet and he and Kate befriend each other over Gerard Manly Hopkins and James Stephens. She stays at his house for that night and comes to the realisation that Mr. Gentleman need not be the centre of her world.



The Company of Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls*



## INTERVIEW

# GRACE COLLENDER KATE BRADY

### Tell us a little about your character.

My character is Kate (or Caithleen, she has loads of names!) Brady. The play centres around her and Baba who are going through this coming-of age-story. It starts when she is fourteen and goes through a period of four years until she is eighteen. She is a very gifted student, and is into a lot of literature and reads a lot. She has had a rather difficult upbringing – her father struggles with alcohol and her mother dies when she is quite young. It's just about all of these things that happen to her and how she copes with each obstacle in order to come out at the end.

### What is the most interesting or challenging part about playing Kate?

I think that because of the language that she uses – she quotes from Shakespeare and Joyce and other readings – keeping the intention [is the most challenging part]. Obviously Edna's style of writing is so beautiful that it's the kind of writing that when you're reading the book you're thinking – God, this is gorgeous. The way she describes even painful things is beautiful, but I can't play it like that because it's not interesting. If I play it like it's all flowery and gorgeous then the character is not real. So it's been a case of really focusing on the action – like asking why am I reading this particular piece at this time in the story, why am I saying this thing?

### You mentioned there that you love the book; what were your initial thoughts on reading the script? Had you read the book before you read the script?

Yes, I had read the book before. I think people might come into this production expecting a kind of a stock thought that Kate is a certain way or Baba is a certain way, but it's never the way it turns out when you take a book to a script because characters come alive and there are always changes. In terms of characters there are characters that are in the book that aren't in the play and there are characters in the play that aren't in the book. I would say it's very much adapted from the book, it's not the same story. But for me as an actor the book is such a fantastic resource because there are lines and direct passages taken from the book, sometimes as scenes and sometimes as soliloquies or asides, that's fantastic because I have this resource that tells me everything my character thinks about.



**Kate transforms quite considerably as a character over the course of the play. What would you see as the main prompts or causes of this transformation or development?**

I think there's a few, it's quite difficult. Obviously the relationship between herself and Baba is very complex. I think it's almost like a co-dependency at the start, and when they decide to split it's like a part of her is gone and it's a break up of a relationship and at that point you have to become your own person. I think that her relationship with her father as well, with Malachi, and obviously we have to mention the death of Lil, her mother, because obviously the death of a parent completely changes things. There is a massive change in her after that in terms of maturity but also in terms of her view on life.

**You mentioned her relationship with Baba a moment ago. Could you tell us a bit more about the relationship between the two characters?**

Absolutely, we've talked about it so much! Something we've talked about a good bit in rehearsals is that Kate asks so many questions and Baba is like, kind of, she's seen as the friend that goes "I know the ropes, this is what's happening here. I know and you don't." But the interesting thing is that when pairs are put together in a story I think each one of them has something the other doesn't. Kate is this gifted scholar, and Baba doesn't have that, but Kate has a horrible home life and I think Kate looks at Baba's home life, and the fact that she can pay to go to the boarding school and I think she thinks "wow, Baba has so much confidence." I think they both look at each other and they both yearn for what the other one has.

Something else we have spoken about is that they both have the same objective - they both want to get out of this situation, but they both go about it in different ways. And they love each other so much that they can't understand how the other person is going to do this.

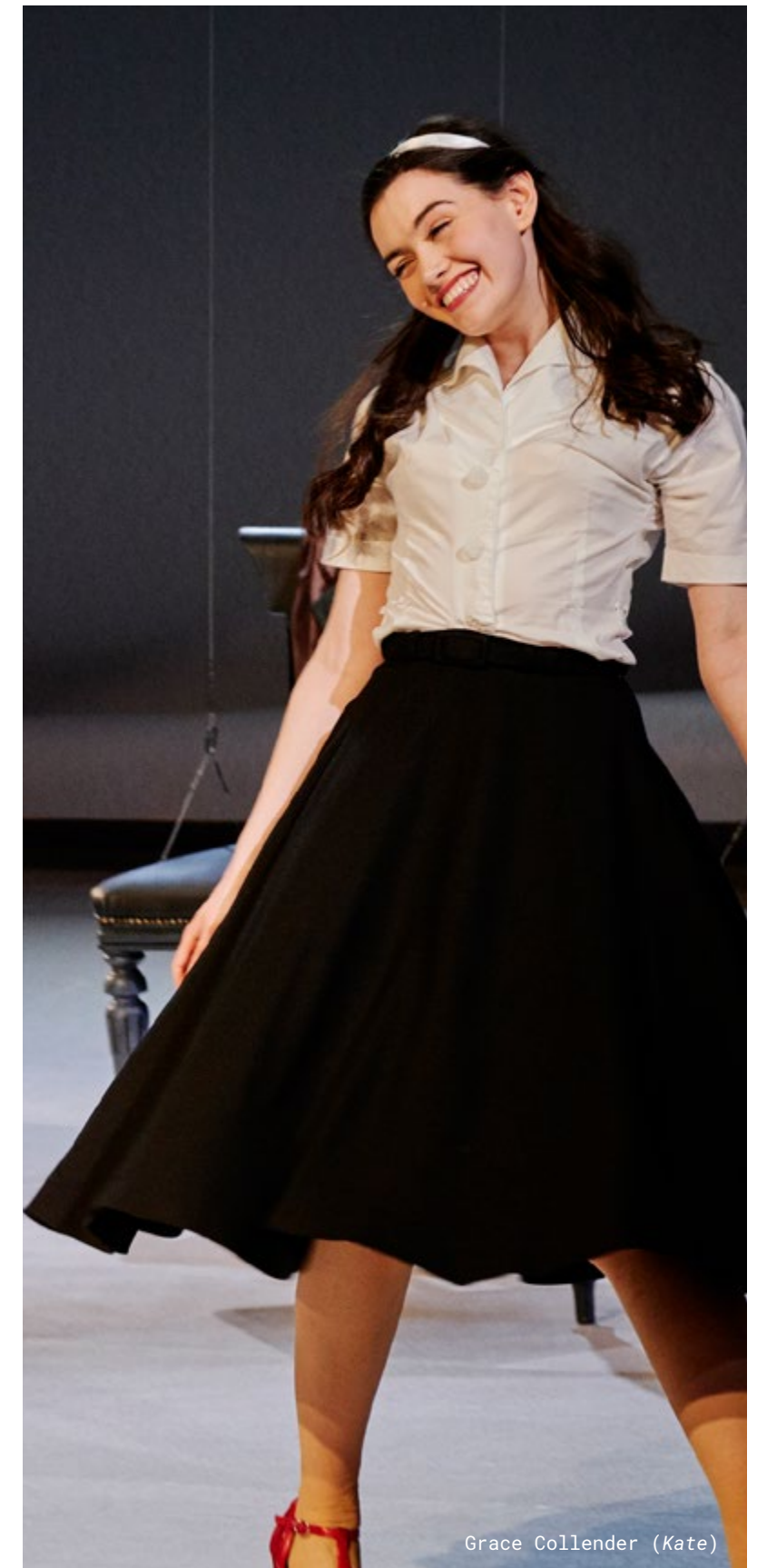
Then Mr. Gentleman gets in the way of this. The dynamic definitely but I think they do realise in the end that they love each other massively.

**What is it about the characters of Kate and Baba that still manages to speak to audiences today, decades after they were written?**

I just think it's inevitable. I think that human nature doesn't change, we just see the same patterns of relationships, whether it's Wuthering Heights, whether it's Pride and Prejudice, whether it's Chekhov; it's just the same patterns in human interactions and relationships.

**If you had to choose three words to describe the character of Kate, what would they be?**

Intelligent. Open. Brave.



Grace Collender (Kate)



Lola Petticrew

## INTERVIEW

# LOLA PETTICREW BABA BRENNAN

### Tell us a little about your character.

Baba is Kate's best friend, and I would say that they're more like sisters – they have this natural affinity toward each other and this sort of intangible tie towards each other. It's inexplicable other than that they are almost like siblings, so they can talk to each other in a way that they can't to anybody else. Because they can do that, they can also be harsh to each other in a way that nobody else can be. The person that you love the most sometimes gets the least of you, and gets the hard and ragged bits while you save the best bits for someone else. She's quite a loud, brash character. She's definitely a force of nature and I think that she just has an unapologetic sense of herself and what she wants. She can be quite loud and demanding but I think that most of the time it's trying to get Kate on board with her way of life because she ultimately believes her path is right and it's the path that her and Kate should be on to get out of the country, to get out of the convent, to get to Dublin, to get to the world, so that they both can live. She believes there's something better for them.

### What has been the most interesting or challenging part about playing Baba?

I think the most challenging part is to not make her come across as almost a sociopath, or nasty, because I think that when she manipulates Kate, and when she's mean to Kate, it comes out of a place of "I'm right and I want the best for you." It is also that sibling thing, you know, they have this massive argument when Baba is being set up in the bolthole and she's kind of just waiting for her to turn around and say "this is wrong, I love you," and Kate's reply is about how much she loves Mr. Gentleman. That's so hurtful and her reply is nasty but it's all coming out of a vulnerability and a need for Kate to be on her side always. It is that sibling thing of saying "I hate you, I hate you, I hate you, and I want to apologise for it, just tell me you love me."

### Can you describe Kate and Baba's relationship?

What we talked about today that's quite interesting is their unconditional love. At the start of the play, the first lines they say to each other are where Kate says "I hate you Baba Brennan" and Baba says "Ditto," and there's no lies about that, that's exactly how they feel about each other at that moment in time but their love is unconditional, they're able to go



back to each other even after all the arguments and fights and differences, whereas Kate's love for Mr. Gentleman is conditional and that's why she eventually leaves him and her and Baba go back to each other again. Also, it is *The Country Girls*, and it's definitely about the two paths they see and both of their ideas, and where they meet in the middle and where they don't, what works and what doesn't. They're definitely two sides of the same coin.

**What were your initial thoughts on coming to the script? Were you familiar with the book before?**

I'd heard about the book before, and I'd heard about Edna, but I'd never read it. It wasn't on any of our syllabuses in school. But upon reading the play, I got a rough first draft for the audition, I was just so excited; first of all because it's Edna and she's a legend, and then just the idea of being able to play one of these two complex, complicated, deep women...which you don't always get to! It's a really challenging story. It might be easy to push it in with a sort of *Lolita* thing; people think that this young girl has been taken advantage of by this older man, but it's absolutely a love story; these are two people who have a natural affinity for each other and it develops over time. Nothing actually happens between them until she's a lot older. Whether that love at the start begins familial and then it develops into something much deeper. The most interesting thing was that we had to sit down with the play and reason things out, sort of pull as much out as we could. I think that's when things get really interesting, when you have to sit down and talk and reason, and firmly put down a sense of why everything is happening.

**What is it about the characters of Kate and Baba that still speaks to audiences in 2019; how do you think they have held their own from 1960 to now?**

I think it's really interesting. I recently read Sally Rooney's *Normal People* and what's really interesting is that there's a sort of comparison there in women in rural Ireland feeling like they can't be themselves until they leave sort of the, like, shackles, of what it means to be a woman in rural Ireland. It still stands quite a lot today. Socially we live in a very different Ireland, but I think sometimes we've made more leaps and bounds than we really have; just because something's in law doesn't mean we act upon them at all. So I think it stands the test of time because it's two young girls trying to figure themselves out in a place that's socially oppressive to them and the idea of getting out somewhere that seems bigger or more. You've room to be around more people who are like-minded, and I suppose that was the same for Marianne in *Normal People* when she moved out to Dublin and went to university and was around like-minded people. All of a sudden her sense of self was more there and I think it's the same for Kate and Baba. I think it's the same for a lot of young girls in Ireland, when they get out, leave home, maybe go to university, and they find their pack of people that think and feel the same. You grow with that, whereas when you're stuck in a place that's really confined you don't really have space to grow with that.

**If you had to pick just three words to describe the character of Baba, what would they be?**

Feisty. Vulnerable. Lost.



Grace Collender (Kate)  
and Lola Petticrew (Baba)



Steven McCarthy

## INTERVIEW

# STEVEN MCCARTHY MR. GENTLEMAN

### Tell us a little about your character.

Mr. Gentleman is the rich man in the town where Kate, the central character, has grown up. He's married. He lives in the big house. He's from away, maybe part-Irish but it's not clear what his background is, maybe French or Swiss. We first meet him when Kate's mother has just died and he has been entrusted with breaking the news that the bodies have not been recovered and that her mother is, in fact, dead. The role he plays in the story is, I guess, he is the kind of celebrity in the town – he's Mr. Gentleman. He's of a class and status, he's the prince really. He is the prince who she aspires to love, and gets to fall in love with.

### What has been the most interesting or challenging part of playing Mr. Gentleman?

I think the easy thing to fall into in anything that can be labelled a romance is having a wash of 'specialness' over the whole thing. For anyone who has ever been in love, met secretly in the middle of the night, or had an affair or had something break up their marriage or their life, when you are inside those circumstances it is an amazing hell. What you're risking is so large, and so I think that Graham has been on to both Grace and I to remind us that there is a ton of spiky conflict, and that we don't have to endow it with a wash of rosy romance.

### Can you describe Mr. Gentleman's relationship with Kate?

With her father being known for wasting his farm away and being a bit of a drunk, he takes a kind of, from a distance, sort of parental role over Kate and slowly but surely that turns into a sort of romantic relationship as the years go by and she grows up. By the time she moves to Dublin and she's eighteen, they see something in each other which is, I think, a desperate loneliness and a desire to be something more than what their circumstances allow them to be. They fall in love with each other, but as with all great love stories, a lot of things are keeping them apart, not least their age difference – they're about 20 years apart in age. And as in a lot of stories it doesn't end well, it's a broken hearted love story! She grows through the relationship and he is unable to. He is unable to change his circumstances or he doesn't have the courage. I think that is the central thesis of the



play really – a young woman learning to trust her own instincts, her own sexuality, in a time in Ireland where that might not have been acceptable.

**What were your initial thoughts on approaching the script? Were you familiar with the book before or was it new to you?**

No, as the foreigner in the group I was probably the only one who wasn't at all familiar with the book! I read the play recognising the challenges of dramatizing a novel that is not a pulsing dramatic arc. It really is a journey of learning and experiencing and, like I said, of Kate developing this trust in her own voice, in her womanhood, her instincts and her sensuality. So when I read it I knew there would be something in the stagecraft, in the making of the show that Graham would employ to get that across, because there's something about music, about pictures, and feelings that can be expressed in a play that aren't necessarily in the scenes themselves. The way in which we hear a book, especially in a book that is just one person's story, they're kind of whispering in our ear and I think that movement and sound is going to be as important to the texture and the feeling that people get as that literary part of the story. It's a real trap to try to take a book that's not really dramatic like this one and try to make it into a script. We've seen it a million times when we ask "Why doesn't this work as a movie when it's such a great book?" But that's why it doesn't work as a movie, because movies and plays do different things to books.

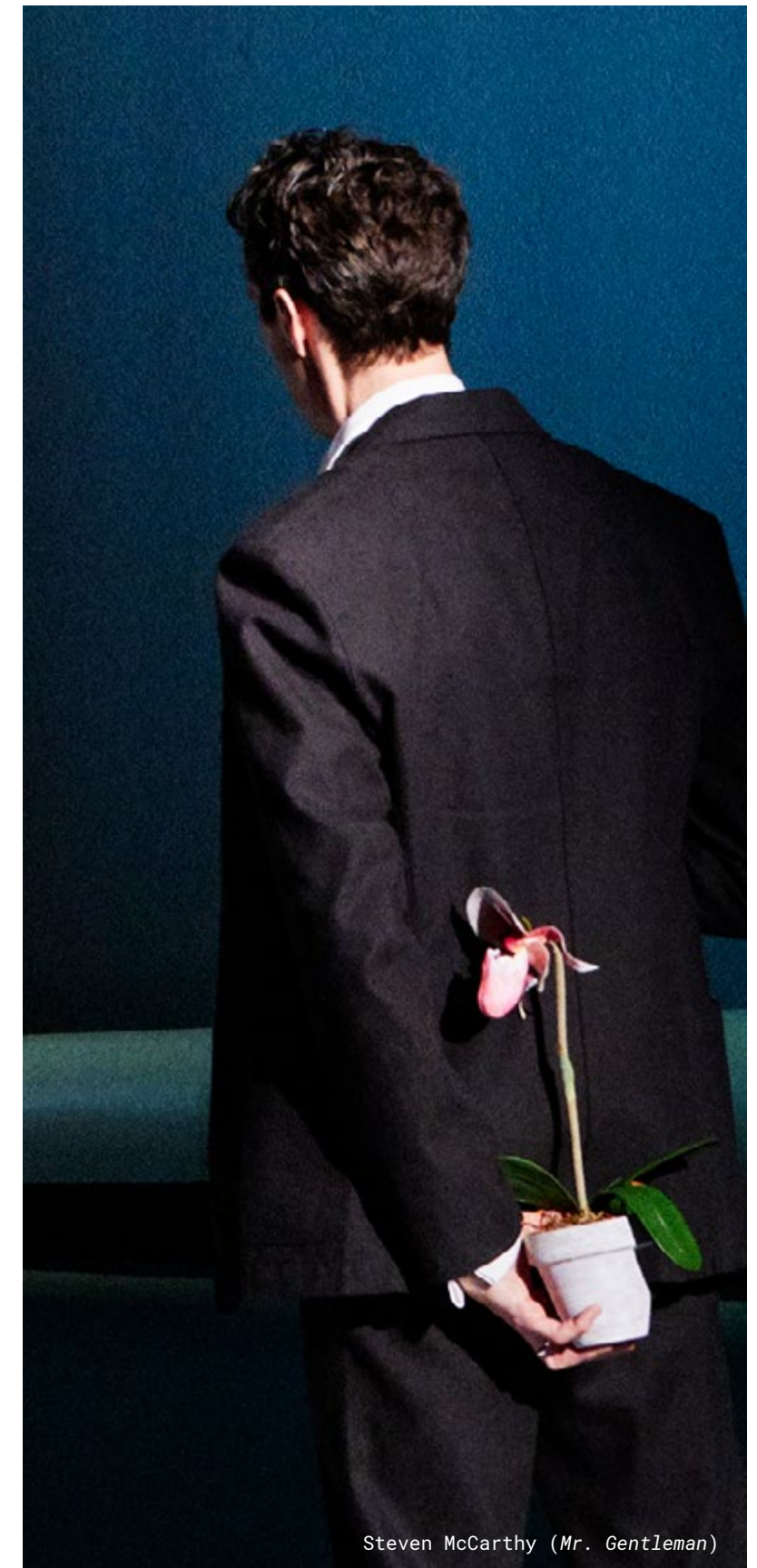
**You mentioned a little while ago when you were talking about the relationship with Kate and Mr. Gentleman that there is a considerable age gap between the two characters, and that is something that has been spoken about before. How have you approached playing that?**

Like I said, all great love stories are about surmounting impossible odds. In the context of the world we live in today, after MeToo, there's a warranted suspicion and a belief that there is always a black and white, and it comes from a place of fear and a wish to protect people from predatory behaviour, which is never a bad thing, to make sure that people are safe. The difference in context, I think, that Edna is writing about is, as she said on one of the first days that we met her, is that this is a passion play, this is a play about enchantment, about a society in which a young woman trusting her instincts about who she wanted to have sex with, what things to believe in, whether or not she should or shouldn't write a book was not up to her for the most part. In that context the role that this Mr. Darcy-like character plays in the story is more about her going "I want him" and finding a way to make that possible and make that happen, and tapping into that sensuality and sexuality and ownership over her own journey. Which of course in Edna's own story resulted in shame and public opprobrium and in her having to leave Ireland to gain a career.

The other thing I think that is interesting with this play is that Kate moves past this relationship; we see the status change and shift as she moves on and in the end finds her first sexual awakening in someone else.

**If you had to pick three words to describe Mr. Gentleman, what would they be?**

Enchantment. Conflicted. Lonely



Steven McCarthy (Mr. Gentleman)

## KEY THEMES

# LOVE

Love, in all its forms, is a prevalent theme in *The Country Girls*. From Kate's first interactions with her mother in scene one, to Baba joining Kate on the boat in the final scene, we see examples of familial love, platonic love and romantic love.

O'Brien's portrayals of love are not overly romanticised, they are realistic, showing all of the joy, confusion and difficulty that can come with love. She also works against assumptions that are often connected to the theme. Kate's relationship with her father is a prime example of this; it could be expected that Kate would automatically love her family, but Malachi's alcoholism and his subsequent behaviour has broken his relationship with Kate. Where there is a strong trusting, loving connection between Kate and her mother, there is a mistrust and disappointment between Kate and her father. Kate's friendship with Baba also shows the different aspects of love; at times Kate hates Baba, and their friendship is not always positive, but they are drawn together by circumstance and there is a strong platonic love between the two girls that sustains their friendship through numerous difficulties. Finally, Kate's love for Mr. Gentleman demonstrates the classic romantic literary love, but even then it is not a perfect fairy-tale love. Their relationship is fraught with uncertainty.

Much of Kate and Baba's development in the play is through their varied experiences of love. Especially in the case of Kate, as they go through the happiness, the disappointment and the uncertainty that accompanies love in the play, they grow up and gain a wider perspective on the world.



Lisa Lambe (*Lil*) and Grace Collender (*Kate*)

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

- What effects does love have on the life of each character?
- What does love mean to each character?
- What types of love can you describe?
- What does love mean to you?



## KEY THEMES

# FRIENDSHIP

Though Kate's relationship with Mr. Gentleman plays a large part in the play, the most important relationship is certainly Kate and Baba's friendship. The girls face most of life's events together for the years that this play spans, from the death of Kate's mother, through school, to their adventures in Dublin and beyond.

Throughout *The Country Girls*, Edna O'Brien explores the positive and negative aspects of Kate and Baba's friendship, painting a realistic picture of the girls' relationship. *The Country Girls* depicts the evolution of their friendship, how it influences their individual lives, and how outside forces influence it.



Grace Collender (Kate)  
and Lola Petticrew (Baba)

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

- How would you describe Kate and Baba's friendship?
- How does their friendship develop over the course of the play?
- What are the elements of a successful friendship?

## KEY THEMES

# FAMILY

Similar to her portrayal of Kate and Baba's friendship, Edna O'Brien's depiction of family life is varied and realistic. She neither romanticises nor exaggerates, but rather brings the idiosyncrasies of each family in the play vividly to life.

Kate's family life is not easy. At the start of the play she has a loving relationship with her mother, Lil, but both live in worry and fear of her father's alcohol-fuelled temper whenever her goes "on the batter." After Lil's death early in Act 1, Kate's relationship with her father deteriorates further and she spends the rest of the play avoiding him and the power he tries to exert over her.

In contrast, the Brennans' family life is much more contented. Baba's father, a vet, is caring and watches out for Kate after she comes to live with them following her mother's death. He and Martha treat Kate as one of their own family. The scenes at the Brennans' house when the girls return there for Christmas show the happiness that is in their home life.

The influence of these two differing experiences of family life can be seen carrying through both Kate and Baba's later lives.



## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

- What do you think?
- What might have been different about the play had Kate had an easier family life?
- What influence does family have on a person's life?
- What does family mean to you?



## KEY THEMES

# RELIGION

Edna O'Brien makes clear comments on the theme of religion throughout *The Country Girls*. Having attended a Sisters of Mercy convent school in the 1940s, O'Brien had first-hand experience of the sometimes stifling nature of Catholicism in Ireland at the time. Her writing reflects this, particularly in scenes where Kate and Baba are in St. Edna's. The character of Sister Immaculata clearly represents the worse effects of the church on Irish life at the time. She treats Baba and Kate with little kindness, favouring discipline over care as shown in the scene where she takes away Kate's photograph of her late mother.

Speaking about her relationship to religion in one interview, O'Brien says "I rebelled against the coercive and stifling religion into which I was born and bred. It was very frightening, and all pervasive. I'm glad it has gone."



The Company of Edna O'Brien's  
*The Country Girls*

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

- What influence does religion have on the lives of the characters in the play?
- What influence does religion have on your life?
- Do you think the position of the Catholic Church has changed since the time of *The Country Girls*?

# ONE CITY, ONE BOOK

This production of *The Country Girls* coincides with the announcement of Edna O'Brien's trilogy as the Dublin: One City, One Book choice for 2019.

Dublin: One City, One Book is a Dublin City Council initiative that encourages people to read a book connected to the city each April. After an open selection process, where readers, library staff and publishers can submit suggestions of books they think would suit the programme, and their suggestions are then considered by the City of Literature team and senior library staff, before their suggestions are submitted to the City Librarian for final approval. Any book can be chosen as long as it has a link to the city and is readily available to readers. In the past, Dublin: One City, One Book titles have included Flann O'Brien's *At Swim, Two Birds*, James Joyce's *Dubliners*, James Plunkett's *Strumpet City*, Roddy Doyle's *Barrytown Trilogy*, Lia Mills' *Fallen*, and *The Long Gaze Back: An Anthology of Irish Women Writers* edited by Sinéad Gleeson.

This year *The Country Girls* Trilogy was chosen because of the impact it had on the Irish literary scene when it was published back in 1960, and because of its wide-ranging, longstanding appeal among readers.

This production will be one of a number of events based around the trilogy that will take place this year as part of the Dublin: One City, One Book initiative.

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

- What do you think?
- Do you think *The Country Girls* Trilogy was a good choice for the 2019 Dublin: One City, One Book title? Why?
- What book would you choose if you were asked to pick a book for Dublin: One City, One Book for 2020? Why?



The Company of Edna O'Brien's  
*The Country Girls*



# GIRL WITH GREEN EYES: A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF EDNA O'BRIEN

From rural west Ireland and her stifling education with the Sisters of Mercy, to nocturnal recitations of Shakespeare by Richard Burton in her sitting room and being pushed on the swings in Grosvenor Square by Marlon Brando, Edna O'Brien has had as colourful and varied a life and career as any writer could imagine.

O'Brien was born in Tuamgraney, Co. Clare in 1930, the youngest child of the family. She has often noted that the strict religious nature of her upbringing, both through family and school, was a suffocating force, and this has featured in much of her writing. Her initial escape from this came in the form of a qualification in Pharmacy and her move to work in Dublin, but it was through words and writing that she would begin to soar, beginning with a weekly column in a railway company's magazine.

It was through her contacts in publishing and radio that she met Ernest Gébler, whom she married in 1954. They had two sons, moved to London in 1958, and remained married until 1964. However, even from early in the marriage, their relationship was fraught, in her memoir she describes herself as "lonelier than I should be for a woman in love, or half in love. There was this gulf between us, so much about him seemed strange and distant."

Despite the difficulties in her home life, O'Brien wrote her first novel soon after arriving in London. Commissioned for a fee of fifty pounds, written in a matter of weeks, and published in 1960, *The Country Girls* was to catapult O'Brien to both success and notoriety. With her book banned, and even burned, at home in Ireland, her name was not one fondly spoken, but in London she began to climb to the upper echelons of the literary world, with each book published becoming more celebrated both in London, and later in Ireland.

A prolific writer, O'Brien has published almost twenty novels, numerous short-story collections, scripts, poetry collections and non-fiction works, and has won many awards for her work including the Irish PEN Lifetime Achievement Award.

Now in her ninth decade, Edna O'Brien's imagination and creativity has not paused, and as this latest adaptation of *The Country Girls* takes to the stage I will leave you with the words of another powerful voice in Irish writing, Anne Enright. "Get ready to applaud, ladies and gentlemen, because there is no one like her. O'Brien, in her 80s, may look like an icon and talk like an icon, but she writes like the thing itself, with prose that is scrupulous and lyrical, beautiful and exact."



Grace Collender (Kate)

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## INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

# GRAHAM MCLAREN

**First off, could you tell us a little bit about your role as the director of the production?**

It's my job to make what is words on a page three dimensional, to basically take it from the page to the stage. I decide first of all which show to do, and I choose the creative team – lighting designers, set designers, composers, costume designers, sound designers, that sort of thing. Also, because I'm artistic director here, unlike other directors I would choose the time of the year that it happens and the length of time that I think it should play, and that's based on how many people I think are likely to want to see the show. I make all those kinds of decisions, and of course the cast. I think, in a way, the most crucial decision a director can make is to choose the right actors. I always think 90 or 95% of the job is done for the director if they've put the right actors in the room, and that's not just about talent. It's about finding people who are natural, open collaborators, people who send and receive information without judgment on themselves or the people around them. Those are the qualities I'm often looking for in an actor.

**Tell us a little about how you came to *The Country Girls*. When did you first read the novel or adaptation, and what were your thoughts on it?**

I was sent the script by Edna. We have a mutual friend as it happens, John Tiffany, who is also a director, and he had said to Edna "I know who you should send this to, you should send it to Graham." So she did, and I read it, and I didn't understand it. I wasn't sure about it at all, I didn't think I got it. But that's not unusual at all. Before coming to the Abbey my career was full of Shakespeare, Ibsen, Moliere, Sophocles, those kind of things. I was steeped in the classics so it wouldn't be unusual for me to feel a little unsure, a little insecure, and this piece was so lyrical it was like reading a Chagall painting – "Am I getting this, is it meant to do this?" As it happened, there was a production of it, an



Graham McLaren with Edna O'Brien on the opening night of *The Country Girls*

earlier iteration of the script I read, being put on in Chichester and I went to see that. I was working on Jimmy's Hall at the time and I took the Saturday off to go see a matinee of it. It was a flawed production, but it really made sense to me, I could see potential in it. So then I went to meet Edna and said "Would you come on a journey with me to make this text, to embrace the Chagall like nature of it, and embrace the fact that you haven't written a play, you've written a dream-play perhaps." And she embraced that, and we've become great friends. Of course I didn't know her prior to that and now I'm genuinely privileged to count her as a friend. She is an incredible human being, an incredible artist.



### What made you and Neil include it in the 2019 programme?

We were actually hoping to do it last year, but I couldn't do it. After I invited her to come on this journey Edna said yes on the proviso that I directed it and Francis O'Connor designs it, and then it was just logistics.

But it's also a story that's proto-feminist, and there's something about Edna's story that's intrinsically linked to *the country girls*, and something about her self-definition as a woman, as an artist, as an Irish ex-patriot; her rage and pain and love for Ireland is beguiling and attractive and I wanted to give her the platform of the National Theatre. The reason for doing it is as much a celebration of Edna as it is of the story.

### *The Country Girls* has become a modern Irish classic, and many people have a strong connection to it. What is it about the novel that has cemented its position in the Irish literary canon?

I have no idea. Genuinely. People go kind of dreamy-eyed about it. I think its place is as much to do about the scandal; there was a scandal about it and people like that, they like the drama. There's an honesty and a beauty in the writing, and in the lyricism of the writing. She's an extraordinary artist, and so all of that has come together in one. And she's a rock star! Even now she's a rock star, and all of that together makes it an attractive idea for people. For all that it was supposed to be about sex and scandal, it's not really, not very much at all and certainly not by modern standards, but she was the first to do it and the impact it had at the time is still reverberating.

### What aspects of the play have come to the fore as you've been directing the production?

There's much been said about the character of Kate as a kind of self-portrait of the artist, but it seems to me that's only one aspect. It is *The Country Girls*, so there's Kate and Baba. If you start to think about the public, scandalous side of Edna, not just the literary genius she has made herself, she's also the roaring girl, which is Baba, who wants to go kiss men, go for cocktails, have a ball and be celebrated in a physical self rather than a cerebral self. So when you start to see these two characters, and their conflict and their split, and their eventual coming together in the end, semiotically it tells you something about how you have to balance these warring elements in yourself to become the person you want to be. On some level, thematically, I'm interested in that.

There's also the relationship with Mr. Gentleman which, if you're not careful you can read through a very modern prism as, you know, those terrible words like 'grooming,' and it is a love affair. Wrongheaded as many love affairs are, but still a love affair nonetheless. What starts as relatively platonic, and is never consummated, incidentally, is certainly transgressive, but we have to believe that this man, this married man and young girl, when you look at the actions of both of them, she's the mature one. He's the child in it, the one who can't quite handle it. She's proactive, including in physical intimacy, she drives that, and it's surprising, isn't it? We've got to look a little deeper. It's fascinating then when you realise the agency Edna has given this young woman. And that relates back to earlier, why was it so shocking. In some ways it's shocking because she isn't a victim, and I think he thinks he loves her but I'm not sure she ever really thinks she loves him. All of that is exciting and, even now, surprisingly refreshing. This is not *Lolita*; he's not Tregorin, it's not abusive, he's more Vershinin. [In Chekhov's *The Seagull* and *Three Sisters* respectively]



Grace Collender (Kate) and the Company



The company of Edna O'Brien's  
*The Country Girls*

**How do you think the characters of Kate and Baba will speak to a 21st Century audience? Will they speak to them in the same way as when the novel was first published?**

I think they will, because essentially it's the same thing. It's the same thing as how my 14-year-old daughter is starting to express herself in very bold ways – the other day she said to me "Dad, what part of me should I pierce first?" "Well, I don't accept the premise of the question, you're not piercing anything!". We all have to go through these rights of passage and define our path in life. It's like Edmund in King Lear who says – I might be born base, but I will not end my life like that. I'm going to use my life to take me to a different place. Well that's all of us isn't it?

**If *The Country Girls* was written today, in the late 2010s, is there anything that could cause a stir like it caused in 1960? Are there any taboos left to be broken in the way that Edna O'Brien broke them?**

I think what's genuinely scary as an artist, as a citizen, and as a parent is that we seem to be dreaming new taboos in a contemporary context. I think there is, for want of a better word, neo-fascist agenda, where hate speech, lazy-allegations, poor journalism and a dysfunctional-at-best media have led to a whole new set of taboos. It's terrifying to think of what Trump and Putin and other regimes have started to visit upon the world. There is a pattern to it; we've seen the pattern before and it is terrifying to see that there are now things that would have seemed implausible as a taboo are now feeling more and more like "you can't say that," "you couldn't do that." It's odd. As an artist you find yourself constantly bumping up against those things, which is our job of course, but I didn't realise I would be bumping up against more and more as time went on rather than less and less. And that's not about behaviour or political correctness or anything like that, it's about what people find acceptable in society. There seems to be more of it rather than less of it. It's surprising considering how we would consider ourselves progressive. It's more cyclical, and that's not a healthy notion to have at my age, to think that your generation, or my kids' generation are going to have more challenges facing them than we've had, and for the first time in a long time that feels likely.

**What do you hope audiences take away from the production as they leave the theatre?**

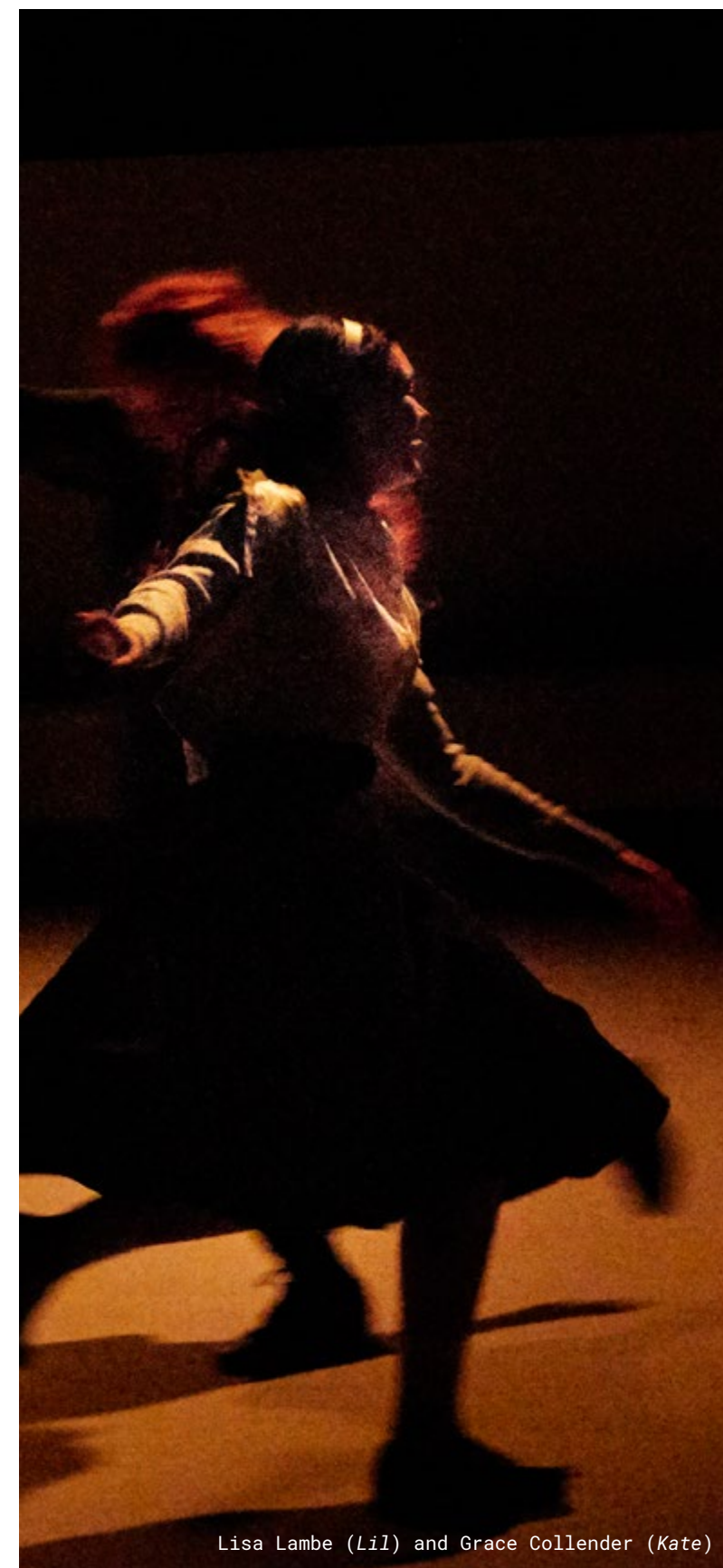
I never think like that. I'm interested in the dialogue, in the dance with the audience. I'm interested in that moment of complicity between audience and performer, but what they'll take away from that I don't know. All I try to do is be as truthful as I can to the detail and the spirit of the work in front of me. What they get, well there are 490 different seats in the auditorium, so I'd imagine it will be 490 different versions of the performance.



# YOU'RE A RIGHT LOOKING EEJIT: THE CENSORSHIP OF PUBLICATIONS BOARD

Though it is now considered a modern Irish classic, Edna O'Brien's first novel was not always as warmly received as it is today. When *The Country Girls* was first published in 1960, it was read by a different Ireland to the one that will see it on the Abbey Stage in 2018. It was read by an Ireland still largely under the ideological influence of Eamon De Valera and Archbishop McQuaid, an Ireland where the Censorship of Publications Board was busy, and where writers like O'Brien felt they had to leave for London or elsewhere to make their mark. Soon after its publication in 1960 by Hutchinson Press, *The Country Girls* was banned in Ireland under the Censorship of Publications Act 1929, which allowed the Censorship of Publications Board to review and potentially ban a book "Whenever a complaint is duly made under this Act to the Minister [For Justice] to the effect that a book or a particular edition of a book is indecent or obscene or advocates the unnatural prevention of conception or the procurement of abortion or miscarriage or the use of any method, treatment or appliance for the purpose of such prevention or such procurement." The Act was introduced after a sustained campaign by Catholic Action groups and was, as Donal O'Drisceoil writes in his essay on censorship in Irish writing since 1950, "part of a general process of 'Catholicization' that became the primary element in the forging of a separate Irish identity [after independence]." The predominantly Catholic leadership of the Censorship of Publications Board (until 1957, at least four out of the five members were Catholic, and all members were male), coupled with the vague definition of 'indecent,' and the lack of definition of 'obscene' meant that many publications, including many which you would not expect, were to fall foul of the Act between 1929 and the late 1960s. As O'Drisceoil notes, the roll call of Irish writers banned by the Board "reads like a 'Who's who' of Irish literature," with Samuel Beckett, Sean O'Casey, Brendan Behan, George Bernard Shaw, John McGahern, Liam O'Flaherty, Maura Laverty, James Joyce and Kate O'Brien included in their ranks.

*The Country Girls*, and four of O'Brien's other novels, were banned by the Board due to her honest discussion of female sexuality. The censorship of Edna O'Brien and John McGahern's novels fuelled the movement for reform of Irish censorship legislation, with O'Brien taking a prominent role in the campaign. After the banning of Brendan Behan's *Borstal Boy* in 1957, the next decade was one in which the Censorship of Publications Board lost much of their credibility and were subjected to ridicule for their decisions. From the secretive trade in banned books across the country, to verses such as the one below, and public debates on the 1929 Act, it was clear that change was on the way for censorship in Ireland.



Lisa Lambe (*Lil*) and Grace Collender (*Kate*)



Grace Collender (Kate)

My name is Brendan Behan, I'm the latest of the banned,  
Although we're small in numbers we're the best banned in the land,  
We're read at wakes an weddin's and in every parish hall,  
And under library counters sure you'll have no trouble at all.

In 1966 the pace of change picked up as the Censorship Reform Society was formed after the prohibition of O'Brien's novel *Casualties of Peace*. The Society pushed for a limit to the prohibition of books, and in 1967 the then Justice Minister Brian Lenihan drafted a bill proposing a limit of twelve years, after which the ban on a book would be automatically lifted unless it was re-assessed and banned for a further twelve years. This Censorship of Publications Act, 1967 passed in the June of that year, leading to the immediate lifting of the prohibition on five thousand publications. This was the death knell for the era of heavy censorship in Ireland, as hundreds of titles gradually reached their twelve-year limit over the following decades. As the clock struck midnight, ringing in 2010, it also rang in the first year since the 1929 Act was introduced where there were no banned books in Ireland.

From its early years as a book that was burned after the rosary in a County Limerick church, *The Country Girls* spanned, spurned and survived decades of censorship in Ireland to become a beloved modern classic.

the roll call of Irish writers banned by the Board "reads like a 'Who's who' of Irish literature," with Samuel Beckett, Sean O'Casey, Brendan Behan, George Bernard Shaw, John McGahern, Liam O'Flaherty, Maura Laverty, James Joyce and Kate O'Brien included in their ranks.

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

- Do you think publications should ever be censored?
- Imagine that this production of *The Country Girls* at The Abbey Theatre has been banned and you have to write the appeal to the Censorship of Publications Board. What would you write?



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# EDNA O'BRIEN

## WRITING IRELAND

She may be one of Ireland's most lauded writers today, but Edna O'Brien moved to London in the mid-1950s at the very start of her writing career. Leaving behind an Ireland that would not welcome her work for many years, O'Brien found success in writing about her home from a distance. There is a potential freedom in writing about a space you no longer occupy; the perspective distance affords can give a writer new angles from which to view the place, and can allow them to write without fear of alienation. This certainly seems to be the case with Edna O'Brien. When speaking in an interview with *The Guardian* about her experience of writing *The Country Girls*, her first novel, O'Brien said that "in a sense, it wrote itself. It was waiting to be written." It took her just three weeks to write the novel, but its ripples would be felt in Ireland for much longer. Later in this pack I will write more about the Censorship of Publications Board's relationship with O'Brien's work, but suffice to say it was not friendly. Almost immediately after its publication in 1960, *The Country Girls* was banned. O'Brien's frank writing about female sexuality, religion and her home country shocked many, and three copies of her book which made it to Irish shelves were burned by the parish priest in her home town of Tuamgraney. With this sort of reception at home – there was no way that O'Brien's career could have continued on the trajectory it did had she remained in Ireland. In fact, it is unlikely that *The Country Girls* would even have gone to press.

Despite her distance from Ireland, the country remains the locus of O'Brien's writing. She is not only an Irish writer, but a writer of Ireland. Though she left Ireland physically, it is clear that she absorbed the essence of Irish life in her childhood in Tuamgraney and retained the details that bring the Ireland of her novels to life ever since. It is in the descriptions of place in the novel of *The Country Girls*, and it is deeply embedded in the dialogue of the play. One just has to hear a few lines, like the exchange between Kate and Finn below, and the setting of the play is clear. It's in the short quick lines, the structure of sentences, the choice of words and the filler words dotted around, and in the overall rhythm of the sentences.

**"Kate: So this is where...**

**Finn: It's temporary...I did have a place in town off Baggot Street, near the catacombs...you heard of the catacombs.**

**Kate: Yeah, it's where poets and artists...**

**Finn: So it is.**

**Kate: The walk did me good...sobered me up. That eggnog stuff was too potent altogether...I drank too fast.**

**Finn: You were there awhile.**

**Kate: I was...hours.**

**Finn: First big heartbreak.**

**Kate: Yeah."**

Edna O'Brien has earned her place in the Irish canon through her honest, incisive and beautiful depictions of her home country. In an interview in 2011, she responded to a question about her decision to continue to write about Ireland despite wishing to escape it in the 1950s, saying that "a writer's imaginative life commences in childhood; all one's associations and feelings are steeped in it." Just as a tree forever grows from its roots, O'Brien's writing holds on to an essence of Ireland that cannot be lost. As O'Brien herself said, "So long as the words and the story spring from a true place, that's all that counts."

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## CONVERSATIONS WITH THE COUNTRY GIRLS:

# EDNA O'BRIEN AND SALLY ROONEY WRITING ACROSS GENERATIONS

*The Country Girls*, Edna O'Brien's first novel, was published in 1960. Sally Rooney's first novel, *Conversations with Friends* was published in 2017. They are two writers beginning their careers from opposite ends of huge social change in Ireland, and yet they are two writers whose works speak to similar audiences about similar concerns. Despite being separated by over half a century, Edna O'Brien's *Country Girls Trilogy* and Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* are not as distant from each other as they might seem. Ireland has changed a lot, but not with the rapidity and totality that we sometimes imagine; the themes that Sally Rooney's work centres around are just the same as those that Edna O'Brien set her pen to in the late 1950s.

“'Chloe liked Olivia,' I read. And then it struck me how immense a change was there. Chloe liked Olivia perhaps for the first time in literature. [...] All these relationships between women, I thought, rapidly recalling the splendid gallery of fictitious women, are too simple. So much has been left out, unattempted. And I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where two women are represented as friends. [...] Almost without exception they are shown in their relation to men. It was strange to think that all the great women of fiction were, until Jane Austen's day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex.”

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

This passage, from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* came to mind as I considered Kate and Baba's friendship in *The Country Girls*, which had caught my attention when I first read the novel as a teenager, and is one of the most interesting aspects of the upcoming production in the Abbey. Writing in 1929, Woolf hit upon a point that is as relevant today as it was then – that across literature there is a glaring deficit in depictions of female friendship. As Woolf writes, up to Jane Austen's day female characters were generally only seen in relation to male characters. Things have improved since; following on from Austen we have classic depictions of female friendships in the work of writers like Lucy Maud Montgomery, Louisa May Alcott, Dodie Smith, and Woolf herself, of course. However,



Lisa Lambe





Bill Murphy

there are still relatively few central female friendships in contemporary literature. Take some of the most popular recent young adult literature, for example, Katniss Everdeen (the epitome of the strong female character in contemporary young adult fiction) in the *Hunger Games Trilogy* is seen in relation to Peeta Mellark and President Snow for most of the series, Bella Swan's story is told through her love triangle with Edward Cullen and Jacob Black in the *Twilight* series, and Clary Fray is seen in relation to various men in her life, Jace, Simon and Johnathan throughout the twelve novels in *The Mortal Instruments*. Recent bestselling adult novels also have a similar lack of central female friendships, even where female characters are well-developed and realistic; the narrator in Anna Burns' *Milkman* finds her story revolving around the *Milkman*, in *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* Eleanor's plot is predominantly driven forward by Johnnie Lomond and Raymond, and in Eimear McBride's *The Lesser Bohemians*, Eilis becomes consumed by her relationship with older actor, Stephen. All of these stories are valuable, and most of them present rounded, interesting female characters, but they also present a sample of the scarcity of strong, central friendships between women in contemporary literature.

**All of these stories are valuable, and most of them present rounded, interesting female characters, but they also present a sample of the scarcity of strong, central friendships between women in contemporary literature.**

It was as I mulled over this that I lit upon the links between *The Country Girls* and *Conversations with Friends*. Both works feature a central female friendship. In *Conversations with Friends*, Bobbi and Frances had previously been in a romantic relationship but by the time the novel opens, they have broken up and are friends. Though the novel follows their romantic relationships with other people, especially Frances's relationship with older actor, Nick, the friendship between the two girls remains a focal point of the novel from the very first words, "Bobbi and I." Similarly, in *The Country Girls*, even though Kate's relationship with Mr. Gentleman is a strong element of the plot, it is her friendship with Baba that the plot reliably returns to as the two girls set off to continue their adventures in London. In both novels, the relationships that Kate, Baba, Frances and Bobbi have with other characters are influential in their development, but it is their relationships with each other that provide a through line to the development of each character. They are side by side through each stage, and each brings a different energy and experience to the relationship, from which the other learns.

That said, neither friendship is uniformly positive – indeed they often reach points where the label of 'friendship' is a tenuous one. In *The Country Girls*, we are first introduced to Baba as someone who Kate does not get along with, and who often goes out of her way to irritate Kate. They are each jealous of the other in ways; Kate of Baba's relative wealth and confidence, and Baba of Kate's good grades and success in school. It is the circumstance of Lil's death that throws the two girls together and as they go to St. Edna's together and later to Dublin they become friends. Similarly, there are moments in *Conversations with Friends* where both Frances and Bobbi prove destructive to each other. Bobbi can be an overly dominant force in the relationship, putting Frances down with cutting jokes and sharp comments. At one point she comments that Frances didn't have a "real personality," and makes other remarks that Frances, and others, ineffectually brush off with the excuse that Bobbi simply speaks her mind, even if her honesty is brutal. However, on the other side of the coin, Frances hurts Bobbi by failing to communicate

with her – unlike Bobbi’s brash criticisms, it is in what Frances has withheld that the hurt lies. When she uses an unflattering depiction of Bobbi in a short story without telling her, she does not only hurt Bobbi through her portrayal of her, but through her previous failure to be open with her. In confronting Frances, Bobbi says “I learned more about you in the last twenty minutes than in the last four years,” revealing the rawest part of the pain that Frances has caused her. However, these difficulties or imbalances within the friendships are part of their literary strength. Through the good and the bad the characters in each novel grow together, they find their personal and shared paths thanks to and sometimes despite each other. Both O’Brien and Rooney are writing real, complex characters which can truly speak to their readers; Bobbi and Frances, and Kate and Baba are not diluted with a rosy filter, they are powerful people whose stories endure over generations. As Cicero wrote, “such only are to be considered friendships in which characters have been confirmed and strengthened with age.”

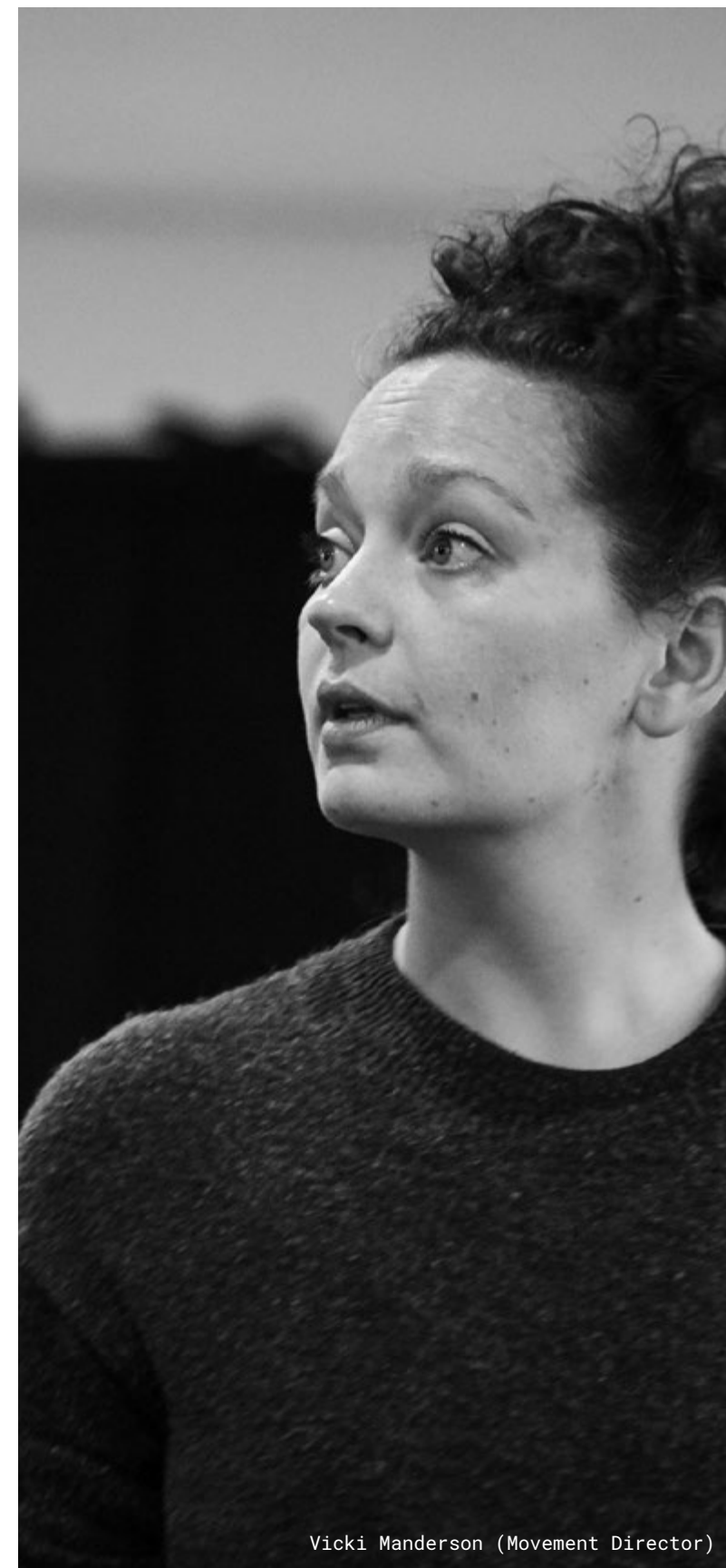
**Through the good and the bad the characters in each novel grow together, they find their personal and shared paths thanks to and sometimes despite each other.**

A second element of O’Brien and Rooney’s writing that remains as prescient today as it was in the mid-20th Century is the idea of escaping restrictive locations or situations in order to find the space to grow and develop as a person. Just as a goldfish will only grow to the constraints of the body of water it lives in, a person cannot reach their full potential in a stifling or repressive environment; O’Brien wrote of herself that “it was in London that I would find the freedom and the incentive to write.” *The Country Girls* centres around both Kate and Baba’s journey from their home town to Dublin and later to London. Baba is bored by the town, and Kate is worn down by her father’s alcoholism and their lack of money. Later, when they go to St. Enda’s, they find themselves in a freshly restrictive environment and soon (under Baba’s direction) ensure they need never return. Once they reach Dublin each begins to find herself. Though Kate continues to fall further in love with Mr. Gentleman at first, she gradually begins to gain a perspective that she may not have had at home under the thumb of her father, so that when things end with Mr. Gentleman, all is not lost for her, she can move beyond that relationship and find her own path. A similar theme emerges in *Normal People* with both Marianne and Connell, the two main characters. Marianne is an isolated, independent young woman who has never fitted in at school in her home town of Carriklea, while Connell has the popularity and easy sociability that has evaded Marianne. As they both go to college they find new modes of operating and interacting in their lives, with Connell finding himself as an outsider, studious but largely alone, and Marianne enjoying a new-found popularity amongst her course-mates. Marianne’s transformation on leaving Sligo bears a marked resemblance to Kate and Baba’s stories. A young woman who could not find a comfortable existence in her hometown leaves and begins to find her feet as an independent person, comfortable in her own skin and open to the world and what it has to offer her.

Once again my thoughts on these two writers call to mind a quote from elsewhere;

**“indoctrinated from childhood [...] spirit takes the form of their bodies, locked in the gilded cage, only seeks to adorn its prison.”**

Mary Wollstonecraft



Vicki Manderson (Movement Director)





Steven McCarthy and Aron Hegarty

Though Wollstonecraft is writing specifically about imposed concepts of feminine beauty, the idea of the spirit taking the form of the body, locked in unless shown other possibilities rings true for the stories of Marianne, Kate and Baba. All three girls know that there are other options available to them and so they are not locked within the cages crafted by their situations, they are merely stopping over in them, gathering strength ready to let their spirits take flight once they are free from the shackles of their home lives or school lives. This hope of something better, somewhere better is a constant feature of the human condition, and one that reoccurs regularly in literature. Hope is the food of existence and of enduring literature, and Edna O'Brien and Sally Rooney have both earned their literary Michelin stars for their subtle seasoning of this hopeful sustenance.

Between *The Country Girls* and Sally Rooney's first two novels there have been 29 changes to our constitution, the internet came into existence, the Good Friday Agreement was signed, the Berlin Wall was built and fell, dozens of wars have started, ended, continued, Ireland joined the European Union, Britain left the European Union, Ireland and the World have changed beyond recognition, and yet we have not changed as much as we think. Joni Mitchell sings that "the seasons, they go round and round, and the painted ponies go up and down" as we are "captive on the carousel of time." As we play the circle game, O'Brien and Rooney write across the diameters of time to the enduring features of human nature – friendship, love, hope.

**Hope is the food of existence and of enduring literature,  
and Edna O'Brien and Sally Rooney have both earned their literary  
Michelin stars for their subtle seasoning of this hopeful sustenance.**

# THE COUNTRY GIRLS

## EDUCATION PACK

This resource pack was made possible  
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