

# ABBEY THEATRE AMHARCLANN NA MAINISTREACH

*Me, Mollser*: Interview Transcripts

Hilary Bowen-Walsh

My name is Hilary Bowen-Walsh, and I'm an actor in the production of *Me, Mollser*.

Well, actors bring different character to life. Whether that be through the voice, just through the body, all sorts of ways.



Usually they use a script, so they're learning off lines. But in some shows as well they can make up the lines on the spot! Can you imagine?

Learning the lines is a challenge. So, for some people, what they can do is they can record the lines, they can listen to them over and over again. For other people, like myself, I just through repetition: again and again and again.

So what you're trying to do, is you're trying to follow the character's thought patterns: so even if you get a bit lost, you kind of know the direction that you're going in, and that's really helpful.

I always think of it as like a memory test. So, you have to learn something for a test in school tomorrow, you learn it all off by heart. So, anyone can do it, if you put the time in!

When you act as somebody else, you're taking on a whole different character. So, maybe that character is angry, or aggressive, or they *talk like this*, or maybe they're very soft and delicate.

So, it's all about discovering the qualities of the character: how they move through the world; what they think; how they see themselves, as well sometimes. So, there's actually quite a lot of things to consider.

You can look up the world. For example, Mollser, the character that I play, when did she live? Was she alone? Did she have people around her? That kind of thing.

So, in acting like someone from the past, it's very important to look at the way that they would have spoken. So, for example, Mollser would have used a lot of language that I wouldn't have used.

In fact, I had to look up a few of the words that were in the play because I didn't know what they meant! Another thing would be how children were viewed at the time. They were a little bit more to be seen, and not heard. And, you know, their situation of living. Like, would they have enough food? Would they have enough water?

# ABBAY THEATRE AMHARCLANN NA MAINISTREACH

Playing Mollser was extremely exciting. She's a character that is full of life and vitality, because the world's against her in one way, she doesn't have very many rights, she's terribly ill, but what keeps her through all of the dark times is her beautiful positivity and her imagination.

And I really enjoyed bringing that to life, because there's always a bright side, even to the darkest day, and I think that's a lovely lesson to have as well.

Filming in the Tenement Museum was - it was quite a moving experience, because you're walking through living history. A lot of the buildings in Dublin that we go past that you would never look at closely, I started looking at them differently. Imagining the people that used to live there.

And having the absolute privilege to be able to be in the Tenement Museum and to be in the spaces that these kinds of characters, these real people lived in, was very special.

And when Mollser talks about all of the ghosts, the people who lived here, the people who died there... it was very real because this *was* the place where they lived, where they died. And it brought on a special resonance to it. A different meaning, a deeper meaning, I think... for me, anyways!

So, I got to be an actor since I was really, really wee, since I was really small! I remember my first role was in play school, and I was the Wicked Witch — and I really enjoyed that — in Snow White, so you could be kind of an evil character.

And, of course, I was very innocent and lovely, of course! So, it was a big contrast. So, I enjoyed that stepping out into another world and into another kind of a person, character, that experience.

And from then on, I was doing the local *feiseanna*: *Feis Ceoil* and *Feis Shligigh*. I was also doing dancing, so I wasn't excellent at dancing, but I kept at it, so I was doing training. I did youth theatre as well, to learn more about improvisation, which means making stuff up on the spot!

And I really enjoyed it. And through all of the years, especially growing up, I was able to play in Shakespeare, I was able to play in Synge, I was able to play loads and loads of different kinds of productions. Irish productions, all of that.

The thing that I love about acting, is really losing your sense of who you are as a person, while exploring other people. And wouldn't it be wonderful to try and get into somebody else's head? Well, the good news is: you can. You can try it out now; you don't need to be a professional actor to do it.

Just take on a character. Whether it's a Tyrannosaurus Rex, you know, from whatever, whenever Tyrannosaurus Rexes were alive, or a wicked witch. You can just embody yourself: put yourself into the body of another person.

# ABBAY THEATRE

## AMHARCLANN NA MAINISTREACH

And I think that's really special, because often times we walk around the world, with, you know, just ourselves at the forefront: 'I am the main character in this play which is my life'.

'But what about that person over there? How do they see the world? I want to see it through their eyes.' And I try it like that. So I really like taking on other people's, other characters' stories.

# ABBEY THEATRE AMHARCLANN NA MAINISTREACH

Jeanne Nicole Ní Áinle

My name is Jeanne, and I work as an actor.

What do actors do? Em, so acting involves learning a lot of lines, learning about your character, the story behind your character, and maybe, if you're not given a story, you might have to create your own.

And working alongside directors and other people in the team to create a person's story or journey.

So, it involves a lot of reading about them, and also your imagination. You're able to build on what you do now and discuss it with other team members, and maybe ask, 'what do you think?' Or get people's thoughts and ideas, and together build a story for your own character.

What's it like being someone else? Em, so... it's exciting! You're playing pretend, which is always very fun.

It's like when you play games like that when you're ten or eleven, and you play moms and dads, or you play... play pretend! And it's very exciting. It can be a fun experience, yeah.

For certain. I think I try as much to become that person, so... embodying their movements or a certain way that they'd speak.

So, in this case, Nadia didn't speak like me, or Nadia didn't move like me, either. So, both of them were different, yeah.

Nadia... It was really interesting. It was a modern role, so she's a person that you might- she might seem like a recognisable character to a lot of us. I know people who are like Nadia.

She's an outgoing, fun person. And it's exciting to play her because she is a window into the world of *Mollser*. And, yeah, her character introduces us to a lot about that time.

And then- and she's a smart person, so it's a really fun character to play.

Filming on the streets was fun... and also a bit distracting at times!

At one stage there was actually a postman that walked by, and he just stood right beside us! And I burst out laughing. So that was fun times.

But I think it's just... yeah, it's important to try and — as much as possible — be in your character, and not in the streets.

# ABBEY THEATRE AMHARCLANN NA MAINISTREACH

Em, it's a long old journey! I think, maybe when I was younger I just really enjoyed it — playing — and I was an only child, so I'd entertain myself by myself a lot of the time. And that kind of led to acting, somehow.

It can be challenging. I hadn't spoken Irish since school, so it was like relearning something.

And then, as any of those who speak Irish understand, it can be, you can sometimes think in English, and say it in Irish, and it might come out wrong.

So, that was difficult. But it also, it really kept you on your toes, and kept your brain working. And I discovered new things about the character, because it was in two different languages, so there was even more to discover, yeah.

I was working with a lovely woman who helped me learn my lines by throwing a ball at me, and catching them and saying my lines while just distracting myself and doing something else.

And yeah, that actually really, really helped get a lot of grammar into my head. And yeah, it worked like that.

Yeah, just have fun, and... acting is the one time you don't have to be shy about yourself, and really just put yourself forward for things.

So, any competitions that you might encounter, or any schools' *feises*, or whatever. Just go for them, yeah.

# ABBAY THEATRE AMHARCLANN NA MAINISTREACH

Sarah Fitzgibbon

My name is Sarah Fitzgibbon and I am the director of *Me, Mollser*.

Directors put together the piece. You work with a writer – I worked with Ali Joy-White – on devising and developing it, and then the director puts all the bits together. So you work with the actors, you work with the designers and you work with the various people to try and pull it all together into one clear vision.

Directors work with actors in a variety of different ways. It depends whether it's a new play or an old play. If it's an old play, you try and help the actors inhabit the characters and inhabit the text and inhabit the world of the drama. If it's new play you're helping them to create that world, because it's never been created before.

You've got lots of different people who will work on any particular play or a film. There is a variety of different people, and you have to come together to collaborate and work together. And so, a director would work with all of these different people, trying to make sure that everything comes together, so that the actor is secure to deliver the best performance they can on the day.

*Me, Mollser* has been around for a while, and we directed it initially to go out and perform in schools but obviously this year is a very different year so we've adapted it to go on the screen. So, it's part of the film. Usually, an actor goes out with the *Me, Mollser* actor and they perform a character called the lamplighter. And the lamplighter comes into the classroom and they help to contextualise or make alive the world that Mollser inhabits

We can't do that this time, but what we've decided to do is write a new character, and we've written the character of Nadia. And she's the character you'll see in the little film before you see *Me, Mollser*. And what she does is to help paint the picture of the world that Mollser lives in.

This character we researched using James Stevens' book, *The Charwoman's Daughter*, which was a favourite of mine when I was a child.

Mollser comes from *The Plough and the Stars* by Sean O'Casey. Mollser is a child character in *The Plough and the Stars* and is very much emblematic of, kind of, what the new Ireland could be; but, tragically, because nobody pays attention to her, or to her needs, she dies.

And so, that is why it's a very important character for me, because I sort of felt that the rights of the child are often overlooked. And so we've decided to look at that big play, that giant of the Irish canon, from the eyes of the child character.

# ABBEY THEATRE AMHARCLANN NA MAINISTREACH

It's been very different to a regular rehearsal room, because in a regular rehearsal room you can get very close to people physically, when you are directing them. And instead we are obviously keeping social distance and we're wearing our masks, and doing all the things that we need to do to keep everyone safe; and that's just different, but the energy is still the same. So it's a little bit different and it's a little bit the same. But the actors are brilliant, and the team are brilliant. And so there's this lovely, warm, safe atmosphere where everyone can take risks with performance and that's what we want to create so that we can create atmosphere for everyone to work and create the best work they can.

I think what is interesting about Mollser is that Mollser has a really great way of telling a story. And I think that that's the interesting thing as a director to work with because within her one story, she tells us loads of stories: about the world she lives in, about the people who live in her world who she interacts with, the stories that she has in her head.

and that's the beauty of bringing it all together, it's working with the actor to try and keep those stories fresh and alive, performance after performance after performance.

I was very lucky. I had access to theatre from the time I was very very small. I also really liked playing with dolls' houses and making worlds that I could control and play pretend in.

And I think if you like to play pretend, and you like to build things, I think those are sort of skills that you then bring into your adult life and you can then become a director.

# ABBAY THEATRE AMHARCLANN NA MAINISTREACH

## Eimer Murphy

My name is Eimer, and I am the prop master in the Abbey Theatre. I'm responsible for all of the props in all of the plays.

Prop master takes everything that's mentioned in the script, and everything that an actor needs to tell the story, and they gather them together and they place them in the rehearsal room for the actors to use.

And then we will do work on them: so maybe they need to be painted, maybe they need to be shined up, or sometimes maybe they need to be made to look older than they are. So it depends on the play.

I choose the objects that I use based on what the designer's concept is for the piece, and sometimes based on what the actor is familiar with and what the actor likes to use.

Actors, some of them love props... some of them do not love props! So, I work with the actors a lot to see what they're comfortable with. As well as the director and the designer, because they want to know what it will look like.

Props are ways of connecting with the character. So, if a character that you like, in anything that you watch on film or television, either owns something that you own, or has something in the background that you know is a particular poster for a particular band, then that means that you will understand that that character likes that band— without the character having to say, 'hey, I love this band!'. It's that, sort of, simple, really. We never have enough money! We rarely have enough time, and we're always running around and we're always very busy. But then, I kind of like being busy, so it suits me.

To be a good prop master you need to understand history; so you need to understand art periods. You need to understand the difference between 1916 and 1926, 1936, and how people's clothes changed and the things that they owned changed.

You need to have good eye for colour and shape. You need to be good at making things; you need to be good at fixing things that break, because actors often break props!

I kind of love everything about being a prop master! I'm a prop nerd, so I kind of love it all. I love making things: I was one of those children who followed all the 'make and do' programmes on television, who made the things. So, I like to make things, I like to fix things that are broken, I like to take an old thing that's really shabby and make it look new.



# ABBAY THEATRE AMHARCLANN NA MAINISTREACH

And then, also, I like to take a new thing and make it look really old. So, I like to be able fool people. If someone comes to a show, and they see something on stage and they come up to me after and go, 'how did you do that?'... I love that, that's my biggest thrill in life.

*Me, Mollser* was, the first time we did it, was particularly interesting for me because I'm used to dealing with an audience that is far away.

So, as soon as I saw this idea that Mollser was going to hand the prop to the children that were watching play, it changed my whole concept and the whole way I was going to do it; because I suddenly realised that there is going to be children holding things.

So instead of me pretending... like getting a new songbook and making it look old, I felt it was really important to get the actual old songbook that was right for Bessie Burgess' character.

Because I felt that there's very few times, I think, that children nowadays, modern children, are going to get to hold a bible in their hands that's from the turn of the turn of the last century.

So, there's a difference in the way things feel, there's a difference the way things smell and look, that are really, genuinely old. And I just thought, 'let's give them that extra little experience of meeting a really old object', if you know what I mean.

Cork, I believe, Phil! [*laughs*] I found them online, a man was selling them in Cork, and my producer drove all the way down to get them!

Well, we're very lucky in the Abbey, in that we have a props store. So, we have a collection of objects that have been gathered since the Abbey Theatre has been around, since 1904.

So, if it's not already in the stock, then I will go looking: I go to flea markets, I go to second-hand shops, I go online now... eBay is great to find things. But genuinely, if the Abbey, if... most of the things, we will have in stock. We have, like, a giant museum/charity shop/I don't know what else, that is full of old things! So, we generally find what we need in there.

As I say, I guess I always loved making things and I always loved old things, I was fascinated by them. I visited my grandmother's house when I was five, the first time, and everything in my grandmother's house was as old as, basically, this house.

So, for me, coming from a modern apartment — everything in our house was new — to this house that was over 100 years old, and everything in it just really struck me. The difference in the materials that were used and in the surfaces and the smells of things... like, I'd never encountered a turf fire before.

# ABBAY THEATRE AMHARCLANN NA MAINISTREACH

And all of those things just made a huge impact on me. So, I kind of always had that interest, and then I went and studied film after school. I did film in college.

And I kind of kept being pulled towards the props side of things, but I wasn't interested in props at that point, I was interested in camera. So, I was studying camera, but it just kept kind of calling me back... if that's not a crazy way to say it.

And then I started in theatre as a stage manager, and I was working doing organising things and doing everything that stage managers do. And part of that is props, and I found very quickly that it all came back to me and I suddenly was making props and just fell into it, basically.

And then, I got a job in the Abbey Theatre *[laughs]*. And I'm there ever since.

I usually say to students that, okay, supposing that we're making a film about you and your life. And the first scene is set in your bedroom. So, if you're in your bedroom, look around your bedroom: every single thing in your bedroom is a prop. Or it's dressing in the background.

Every single thing. So, if I'm a prop master and I'm working on the film of your life, I have to find something that looks like every single thing in your bedroom, for that one scene. And I have to make your bedroom, for that one scene. And then, say your next scene is in your classroom: I have to make everything that's in your classroom around you now. That's my job.

# ABBAY THEATRE AMHARCLANN NA MAINISTREACH

Victoria Miller

My name is Victoria Miller, I'm a costume designer.

Costume designers are the ones that decide on what clothes the actors are wearing during the show.

I choose the clothes with collaboration with the director, and a lot of research. So, I look at pictures, and see what people wore at the time. And then, from there, I take on what the actor are in the show.

When I choose clothes, I look at their social background. So, if you are poor, you obviously have to have poor clothes.

To make the clothes look old, we have a wonderful lady in our department called Sandra, and she does a process called 'breaking down'. And for that you can use household implements, like a cheese-grater for making the hems of clothes look worn and frayed.

Costume designers are important because — subliminally — we tell the story of the character before they open their mouth.

Subliminally, you find you know who the character is then they go on stage.

Everybody does it, every single day. You make assumptions about a person by the way they look.

I chose the costumes for *Me, Mollser* because I did some research, and I looked at a lot of pictures of the people around about this time. Most of the picture that I looked at were much more extreme than the ones that are appearing in the film. If I had done the ones that I had done the research on, nobody would believe it because they are so dirty.

With the new character, Nadia, again, I did some research. And I made a decision fairly early on that she had to be fairly neutral. The kind of person, as a cleaning lady, you tend to walk past, and you don't necessarily notice.

Yes. I do choose their jewellery. Because there are little, kind of, touches that you don't necessarily notice.

For the Nadia character, if you look very carefully, you can see she's wearing a gold necklace, and there's an 'N' and an 'L', and that's referring to herself and her daughter.

Yes, there was some things I had to do for *Me, Mollser*.

# ABBEY THEATRE AMHARCLANN NA MAINISTREACH

During the filming it was extremely cold, so we had to, kind of, have everybody wearing thermal underwear, so they didn't get cold.

We had to throw on heavy coats, and give our actresses warm water bottles, and keep warm scarves and things like that, so that they didn't, kind of, die with exposure.

Once you have an idea, it's a really good idea to have a word with the department you're working with.

You want everybody to be on the same page, because otherwise it'll look peculiar. So, the Nadia character and the Mollser character had to balance so one was not too bright, and the other one too dowdy.

I collaborated with Sandra, who is our break down artist, Tara, who was helping me doing alterations on the show. So, very subtle things like levels of hems, particularly for the Mollser character.

And, again, Sandra doing the breaking down, so particularly the cardigan, for the Mollser character, had to be dirty. And the Nadia character, all her clothes had to be just... looked as though they are not fresh.

She's worn them a lot of times, and it's not new. Because again, if it's very new, everybody notices it.

I got interested in costume a very long time ago, because I started as a sewer and I discovered that, very early on, I was never going to be an intellectual, and I was good with my hands. So that was the route I took.

I was really lucky, because my family had connections with somebody that was in the theatre. And, through working with this designer, I learnt a huge amount. And I am forever grateful for him, because he showed me patience and nurtured me into the costume business.

When I was eleven and twelve, I was very lucky because the school I went to valued craftwork.

So, I'm of a generation where the crafts were really valued, and we had a very full education in that kind of way.

One of the things that you may or may not notice, is that Mollser mention that she has TB, so we had to do a bit of research on what happens when you cough up blood.

So, we had to go on and Google what it was like when you cough up blood, and to get the right shade, so when you looked at it it didn't look as though it was false!

# ABBAY THEATRE AMHARCLANN NA MAINISTREACH

Phil Kingston

My name is Phil Kingston and I'm the producer of *Me, Mollser*.

A producer makes sure that everything is practically in place to help the project reach fruition, to help it work, yeah? They'd work very directly with the director, and also the head of production. So there's kind of two sides: there's the artistic side and the practical side. And you work with both of those to make sure they've got everything they need to do what they need to do.

Well, the unusual thing about this version of *Mollser* is that we filmed it. Usually, when we do 'Priming the Canon' plays — and *Mollser* is one of the 'Priming the Canon Plays' — is we do them in schools. We go on a tour, we'd visit a school, or maybe a local arts venue. But, because of Covid, we can't do that. So, we decided, 'we're gonna film it'.

So, it's completely different. We had to set up a different way of, sort of, capturing the performance on film. That included finding the place to do it — and we're actually in the Tenement Museum, who have very very kindly let us film here — and we had to make sure that we had permission to film, I had to make sure the actors were the right actors that sort of thing. It's all done in conjunction with the director and the head of production.

I had parents who really encouraged me to be creative. I can remember, when I was about ten or eleven, writing a story about these two friend travelling across this mysterious landscape. Sometimes they're on a lake, sometimes they're on a desert. By the end of the book, you realise they've travelled over somebody's face. And you don't realise that until the end of the book.

And I just love the way that you can do lots of little creative things to create a bigger creative thing. And I've got to say, I think that's where all my delight in making theatre comes from. I've been a writer, I've been an actor as well, and all those skills end up being involved in this project.

Well, the 'Priming the Canon' programme is the Abbey's way of introducing the classics of Irish theatre to the younger possible citizens, as it were, of the nation. (08:56:06)

It's an idea that Sarah Fitzgibbon and myself came up with a few years ago. And what we do is we ask a writer to come up with a story from within the world of a classic play. And Sarah has this great idea to always try and make it the youngest character we can find: a child character, if we can find them, yeah? So, for example, *Me, Mollser*, which is written by Ali Joy-White —, which you've just seen — that's *Mollser* from *The Plough and the Stars*.]

Then the second play we did was *Me, Michael*, which was Michael Evans from *Dancing at Lughnasa*: originally by Brian Friel, but then Tara McKeivitt wrote *Me, Michael*. And that's a standalone play,

# ABBEY THEATRE AMHARCLANN NA MAINISTREACH

and that can exist in its own right. But once you've seen that play, you'll understand Dancing at Lughnasa when you go and see it. You'll be familiar with that world.

And the third one we did by Dylan Coburn Gray was *Me, Sarah* which is Sarah Tansey from *The Playboy of the Western World*. And the whole idea is that we introduce the context of these plays to children, so they get a sense of the world, and then they immerse themselves in that world.

And they're proper plays. We were very insistent upon this. They're proper plays, with ups and downs. And, you know, you laugh and you cry, and by the end of it you've had a proper theatrical experience, but usually in your school or your local arts centre.

I had parents who really encouraged me to be creative. I can remember, when I was about ten or eleven, writing a story about these two friends travelling across this mysterious landscape. Sometimes they're on a lake; sometimes they're on a desert. By the end of the book, you realise they've travelled over somebody's face. And you don't realise that until the end of the book.

And I just love the way that you can do lots of little creative things to create a bigger creative thing. And I've got to say, I think that's where all my delight in making theatre comes from. I've been a writer, I've been an actor as well, and all those skills end up being involved in this project.