

So, you want to be an actor?

"You'll never be the man your father is," my grandmother used to say. "Thank God!" I'd say drily, to myself.

THE Lir is a new drama school being founded at Trinity College this year, and it is to be significantly funded by Danielle Ryan.

Now, I never attended drama school, opting to rely solely on my 'talent', and the idea conjured up images of pasty-faced, middle-class youths and loud, obnoxious teenagers.

I can't say I came from a deprived background, either. Where I went to school everybody wanted to be a doctor or an engineer. I told the career counsellor I wanted to be a bomber pilot. However, most off-spring live the ideology of their parents in their early adult life and so at 23 I left university with an honours degree in engineering, a Collingwood Cup medal (All-Ireland university soccer) and a steady girlfriend. All I needed to do was get married, buy a washing machine, work for 40-odd years and die. I got a job on a building site — my Vietnam — where the drills reminded me of machine-gun fire. After whinging for three long years, I was lucky enough to get a Morrison visa and I took off for California.

The above quote regarding my father is not meant to disparage his life. My father is a good man and he has given me some expert advice over the years, but I was living his life, not mine. In San Francisco I traded country, girlfriend and career. I pursued acting and my life became a dream. Not quite.

When I heard about Ireland's new Lir acting school, I thought: 'trust a member of the Ryan Dynasty (her grandfather was Tony Ryan of Ryanair) to set up an elitist acting academy when the country is on the verge of a blackout'. I wanted to ensnare Danielle Ryan and torture her slowly with my cynical questions. Firstly, I'm curious to know whether it's truly altruistic or partly a business venture from her standpoint. "No ... it's something that I thought was very important. In the last two years I've met every writer and director and every interesting person in the country in the industry ... I have written correspondence with Brian Friel and that's something amazing. It's not making me any money, of course, but I'm enjoying every day that I'm spending on this. I couldn't act when I



If you'd like to see your name in lights, a stint at a good acting school can bring you a long way, Danielle Ryan tells part-time actor **Shane Nestor**

was pregnant and so I started this then."

I ask if she's optimistic that noteworthy talent and casting agents from the Irish industry (like Hubbards — now based in London, Frank Moselle and Lisa Richards) will come to their showcases: "Oh yeah, yeah it's no problem ... (These showcases are top notch. They're full productions. Maureen Hughes came to one of our forums to give us feedback. This is in their interest as well — the people coming in from New York and London. The Academy will be funding them to come over."

I ask her whether she will get a "deal" with Ryanair. "No, no," she laughs good-humouredly. "Absolutely not. I don't get any deal". And then, after a moment, she jokes: "you've a good point though. I might ask him (Michael O'Leary)."

Aaron Heffernan is doing the more theory-based Drama Studies course in Trinity and enjoys both the academic and practical side, and while he doesn't 'write off' attending a drama school of The Lir's calibre, he's not sure whether he wants to limit himself to acting just yet. "Maybe it's naive, but I think there's so much time to do different things. I don't want to rush into something like acting school and then get out there and be a star. I don't really believe in that. I think that it's best to explore as many avenues as possible ... little opportunities arise the more open-minded you are about it."

Indeed, after receiving rave reviews at the last Edinburgh Fringe Festival with The Trinity Players' show *Obama Mia* (where he played the president) he has been bitten with the bug for stand-up. He submitted a clip for the most recent RTE *Storyland* competition (the competition which rendered the *Hardy Bucks* series), plays in a band, and is open to the idea of presenting in the future.

I put it to Danielle Ryan that drama school is not a prerequisite to an acting career — although it's hard to deny that a lot of the top actors in Britain went to prestigious drama schools.

She admits: "It's not absolutely essential, but it will help. You're going to leave (graduate from The Lir) having the industry, (in Dublin, London and New York), see you in six productions. You will have a show reel and voice demo. You'll have an agent who knows what you can do. You'll also know the industry very well. All the technicians and directors graduating with you. Those three years will never be as productive and intense," she points out.

It is a rigorous discipline and student will "probably never be fitter". "Because we have so few actors (16 places — 2 for non-EU members), we're seeking funding for post-Lir, so that they can come back and do development work. And we can fund them to tour as well if they need to. Or whatever needs to be done. If a particular actor is very good, but needs to get over to The States and is just stuck, for example. The Lir will always be there for the people it has trained."

So developing contacts is very important, and Aaron Heffernan does confess he was 'born into the business in a way' — his father is a director in RTE and his grandfather was a comedian.



Danielle Ryan says the course is a good stepping-stone; Professor Brian Singleton (top) and Edward Kemp (above) will oversee the process for RADA for the next five years. Inset, an artist's impression of the building after completion.



But he says he is reluctant to use these contacts until 'he has earned the right.'

George Bernard Shaw recognised the value of actor training and donated the royalties from *Pygmalion* (and subsequently *My Fair Lady*) to RADA (the Royal



Daniel Day Lewis: one of the ambassadors for The Lir.

Academy of Dramatic Art) in London.

Danielle Ryan, who also trained at RADA, is following on this tradition of generous investment with The Lir. She is facilitating RADA to implement similar structures to theirs. Indeed, Professor Brian Singleton and Edward Kemp, the RADA director, will oversee the process for the next five years and The Lir has Daniel Day Lewis as one of its ambassadors.

It is a comprehensive course and Danielle Ryan has a genuine concern for her students' future. She goes to lengths to stress that there will be an encouraging environment for the auditions and that "the best will get in" regardless of their socio-economic background. The Lir has the potential to significantly improve acting in this country. As the gifted actor and teacher, Sanford Meisner said: "It takes 20 years to become an ac-

tor." With this course, students will be well on their way.

A lawyer acquaintance once said to me: 'I wanted to act as well. I just wanted to get paid for it. So I became a barrister.'

I admit I've had little financial success as an actor, but some Irish-based actors do manage to sustain themselves, between theatre, film, tv, voice-over and commercial work. Acting can be a stepping-stone to something else or, if you're willing to put your eggs in other baskets, it can complement other work. Danielle, Aaron and myself all started out just wanting to act and our circumstances, or interests, changed, leading Danielle to business, Aaron to stand-up and me to writing, which shouldn't exclude us from acting in the future. So, if you're looking to work solely as an actor in Ireland it's probably best to have other skills up your sleeve.

The closing date for applications to Lir is March 1st.

I'm not Irish-born, but I can't wait to cast my vote

AFTER living in Ireland for more than a decade and trawling through the complicated, excruciatingly slow Irish immigration system, the day I finally earned my right to call Ireland my home had arrived.

"The ink on your passport is not even dry yet and you want to vote?" said the civil servant at the Dublin Passport Office as he handed the Irish passport to the newly naturalised migrant. Like many migrants who came to these shores seeking a better life, I fell in love with Ireland and have endeavoured to live by the declaration every naturalised migrant makes in their local district court by swearing their "fidelity to the nation and loyalty to the State".

I was concerned that I would miss the opportunity to vote in this Friday's general election on account of not receiving my passport in time to register. For the week prior to the voting deadline, I was feverishly checking the status of my passport application, praying that it would be issued in time. Miraculously, it was ready for collection on the day of the registration deadline.

So I headed for the passport office with the intention of collecting it and then going to the nearest garda station to complete the registration form and deliver it to the register of electors. When I reached the counter at the passport office I joked with the civil servant how relieved I was, as now I could finally register to vote. His reaction shocked me as he said "the ink on your passport is not even dry yet and you want to vote?" My reaction was to say "I have wanted to vote



Since 1995, 35,000 people have been naturalised here, and all of them want to participate fully in society. Some are very excited about voting for a better country this Friday, says **Dil Wickremasinghe**

from the moment I set foot in Ireland, as I knew it was going to be my home, and I wanted to have a say on who should be our leaders, as their decisions impact on me."

The civil servant was surprised at my passionate response but swiftly directed me to ensure all my documents were in order and called the next person in line. This incident upset me as I worked extremely hard to become an Irish citizen and ardently believe in active citizenship.

However, there are many misconceptions regarding migrants and their desire to participate in Irish society.

Migrants can't vote — this is a common myth. Migrants are entitled to register as voters but their residency may limit the types of elections in which they can vote. British citizens are the largest migrant community in Ireland, numbering more than 100,000, according to the last census and may vote in Dáil, European and local elections. Other European Union (EU) citizens may vote at European and local elections, and non-EU citizens may vote at local elections only. Naturalised migrants who obtain Irish citizenship can vote in all elections.

The Celtic Tiger attracted economic migrants from all over the world and although many came here for a limited time only, many have stayed. They have built a life, made friends, created families and Ireland is now their home.

One of the most prevalent assumptions and perhaps the most hurtful is that migrants are not interested in playing an active role in Irish society and are not politically aware. This week when I was approached by canvassers, they were surprised by my knowl-



edge of Irish politics and that I actually even had opinions on key issues such as the economy, health and education. Migrants do not live in a bubble. They are concerned about the future of Ireland, just like all citizens. The 2009 local elections boasted a record-breaking 38 new Irish candidates demonstrating the political and active citizenship aspirations of the newest members of Irish society.

Another damaging view is that migrants only care about their community and are not interested in general issues. These issues impact on every single resident in Ireland and migrants are no different. In addition to general issues, migrants are also concerned with discrimination and racism.

If you don't look Irish, you are not Irish, right? Well between 1995 and April 2009, more than 35,000* people were granted citizenship through naturalisation, so a person's skin colour or accent is

"THE INK ON YOUR PASSPORT IS NOT EVEN DRY YET AND YOU WANT TO VOTE?"

no longer an indicator of their citizenship status or their voting rights. Canvassers have been known to ignore and not engage with people who don't look or sound Irish, as they assume they

are not able to vote.

The winds of change are picking up, and the general election of 2011 is promising to change the Irish political landscape. Its outcome will undoubtedly impact on every resident. I firmly believe that if we all take a more active interest in Irish politics, and ensure that we hold them accountable for all the pre-election promises they make to us, we still have a chance to create an equal, fair and prosperous Ireland. As one of Ireland's newest citizens, I am hopeful this election will restore the nation's confidence in our leaders, revive our struggling economy, and bring about lasting and positive social change. On Friday I will cast my vote and join my fellow Irish citizens in wishing for better times ahead.

*Figures based on responses to parliamentary questions and Eurostat statistics.

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