

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 offspring 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 naïve, 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.