

Eithne Hand

Take me home,
country roads.



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In the early 1990s, I was a researcher and later a producer on the Gay Byrne morning radio programme. The show had an average audience of 747,000 listeners – that’s about the only listenership number I ever properly remembered – so if there was a gag, or a laugh on the show, the chances were that one in three adults on the island heard it. If you were stuck in the car in traffic and something comical was on the show, you could literally look left and right and see other people smiling.

We travelled all over the country – sometimes three different outside broadcasts in a week. In each location, the OB guys would set up aerials on mountains or run transmission or power lines out of small businesses. Meanwhile Joe Duffy or Ann Walsh and myself and a broadcast assistant would drive hither and yon to either report on something or to set up some of the many long-running elements like the Karaoke Competition aiming to find the best singer, or the annual hunt for the Gold Bar, or just the Town Talent competition or auditions for *Oklahoma*, to be performed by the pick of the island, live on air from the radio centre in Donnybrook starring Gaybo and Mike Murphy, Kevin Hough and the very best of the am-dram talent.

We’d arrive the evening before, and often get to see a show in the local hall or do auditions for the following morning’s live broadcast. From Malin Head (winners of Ireland’s Tidiest Town); to a hostel in Aughavanagh (special birthday celebration of *An Óige*); to the quay in Wexford town where a microphone was hidden in a dustbin and Gay’s voice would call out – *Hello, Hello!* Joe Duffy and I would be hiding around a corner somewhere and when someone stopped and started talking back... Joe Duffy would leap out and all three would be on air.



I remember when Ballyroan, a small village in Laois, won the National Town Talent competition after putting on an amazing show - you could literally feel the lift in the place – a local pride that meant something. We staked out phone boxes on main streets, set up the phone to ring and then some local would answer out of curiosity and Gay would announce that he or she had won a weekend somewhere. Some of it was ridiculous but we also did serious panel debates on fish farming and ring roads and post office closures – it somehow made a community of the whole island and I loved it.

Travelling the length and breadth also gave an insight into the physical shapes of Ireland, mountains and plains – parts I would never have travelled to. We got to really appreciate how spectacular our own autumn leaf turning is, the white of winter in Wicklow, the dramatic rise in hanging baskets in the midlands, May bluebells, roses on roundabouts, blooming rhododendrons on the road to Achill or Killarney, and the fuchsia/montbretia roadsides of Mayo.

Cut to 2012 - I'd left RTE and found myself producing a one-man show called *The Man In The Woman's Shoes*, written and performed by my partner, Mikel Murfi. The show was commissioned by Sligo Arts Office and Hawk's Well Theatre as part of the Bealtaine Festival for five performances only. The world premiere took place in fact in a foyer of St John's Hospital in Sligo where very bemused residents were wheeled out to watch 'the show'. The automatic doors swished open and shut throughout. I was on hand with the script in case of emergency – some dozed, a loud voice said, "*Turn him down, he's too loud.*" Afterwards, I asked the only woman who seemed to be taking it all in, what she thought. "*It was ok*" she said, "*but I've seen it before.*"



From that start, and thanks to two sell-out shows at the Hawk's Well Theatre itself – we were asked by the national Bealtaine committee if we would allow them to set up a short national tour in 2013. That tour went so well that we decided to continue offering it to theatres. So, for the past seven years I am again ending up in cities, towns and villages all over the country – touring this and the subsequent 'companion piece' *I Hear You and Rejoice*. From a tent in Whiddy Island with a donkey braying as accompaniment to two nights at The MAC theatre in Belfast when the raw emotion of the audience was almost unbearable – we have met with the same people as I met before – regular folks who want to escape, to forget the bills, allow magic to possibly happen. This time, apart from producing, I'm the lighting technician, hair wrangler, costume mistress, props master, and supplier of sweets and water. I get to meet people all the time, they stop to chat at the lighting desk on the night or come up afterwards. We both know the technicians in every venue, the venue managers, the marketing people – teams pulling together or falling asunder.

And as for the ushers – what can I say – they are nearly always local men and women, vital for the fifteen minutes before the show when they shine torches and jostle people together and then they wait to watch the show. I've met ushers who get rostered on months in advance so that they can see the shows again - all united by this love for the live moment.

There's a festival in West Cork called the Fit-up Festival and their mission is to bring theatre to tiny populations like Knockcrohan, or Hare Island or last summer to the Church of Ireland, Glandore with the deacon sitting in the front row (she loved it), Jeremy Irons literally on a window sill, legs dangling. The festival operates on a shoestring but succeeds so well in bringing drama to those intimate small halls. They are very special nights.



Even though we've brought the shows to London and New York more than once, there is no comparison to arriving in an Irish village or town for the first time, sometimes there is even new gravel or the smell of paint and the local committee person always there to 'open the hall'.

We've come a cropper a few times – in Timoleague the lights failed completely – we found a single working bulb on a different circuit while Mikel kept talking. Later it turned out the fuses blew because the chip van outside was also using electricity from the hall and when he turned on his festoons as the evening light faded – hey presto, black out!

Afterwards some of the audience said they hardly noticed and thought it was part of the plan. Same as the sheepdog who wandered up the main aisle of the Ballroom of Borris House right in the middle of the show, thinking the man on stage was calling him. We weren't asked back to one village because the Parish Priest thought one of the lines in the play was 'mocking' the priesthood. He is the chair of the parish hall committee. And we think things like that don't happen anymore.

So, in a world that keeps turning, I've ended up turning back the clock and finding myself on every highway and by way of the island again – it makes a huge difference to how I see Ireland. I think we don't really learn in school how small we are, how much of an island community we are.



We are only 4.8 million humans – half the number of people who live in Greater London. We have vast amounts of land to share, so much beauty on our coasts and mountains and from my experience, I think most people who live here, love this place.

Sometimes you have to go abroad to learn where you are from, but I cut my chops on a rare radio programme and lucky me – I got to have seconds.



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Eithne Hand is a writer and producer. She was Head of RTÉ Radio 1 from 2003-2006. Since leaving RTÉ fulltime she has written/directed four radio dramas. She currently produces Poetry File on RTÉ lyric FM. As a theatre producer with Loco and Reckless Productions, she tours two one-man shows written and performed by Mikel Murfi. Her first poetry collection, Fox Trousers will be published in May 2020 by Salmon Press.

Email: ehlandr@gmail.com

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