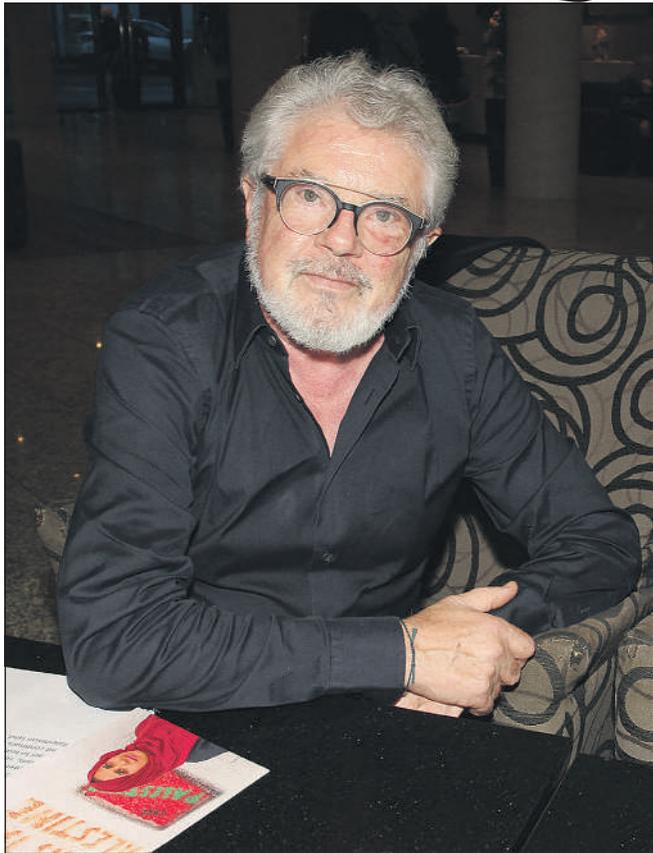


The Interview...

From Tyrone to Gaza, via



John McColgan. Pic: John Walsh

by Anna Hayes

HE MIGHT have travelled the world with his seminal work 'Riverdance' and other success stories but it is very clear, even from first encounters with John McColgan that Wexford is a place very much in his heart.

We meet an hour-and-a-half before the launch of the Wexford leg of his new photography exhibition, 'This Is Palestine', an insightful and humanising look at a crisis that few of us could claim to be experts on.

As I sit down in the lobby of White's Hotel, he is searching through his phone for something, remarking "I met one of my heroes today," before showing me a photograph of himself standing next to the statue of Nicky Rackard in Selskar Square.

The subject of Wexford's seeming resurgence under the baton of Davy Fitzgerald is discussed as the Tyrone-born but Wexford-reared producer admits that he always keeps an eye on the Hurling Championship while Wexford are in it but loses interest thereafter as it has, he believes, become too predictable.

McColgan's Wexford roots are something that he is happy to talk about as they are clearly fond memories of summer strawberry

picking, peering over the heads of adults in a packed hall to watch travelling players, listening to Sunday evening plays at his neighbour's house, and attending the local school and shop in Tombrack.

Born in Tyrone in 1945, McColgan moved to Wexford at the age of four after his father was demobbed from the army. He attended the local school in Tombrack and lived on a farm with the O'Toole family which soon found him enjoying the process of farming.

"I earned my first money thinning turnips when I was 12 and picking strawberries with the hesian sacks on your knees. Mrs. O'Toole used to bring out the lunch and you'd have a Lucozade bottle with the tea in it, mixed with the milk and sugar. You'd sit back in the hedge on a sack and have your sandwich, tea and a chat."

It was through his connections in Wexford that McColgan was first introduced to the magic of the arts and theatre.

"The very first live show I saw was in the Presentation Convent in Tullow - my neighbour's daughter was in the show 'Pirates of Penzance'. She was fantastic and that was the beginning of an

interest in live theatre."

This led on to attending Tombrack Hall where the Paddy Dooley Players frequently performed plays like 'Murder in the Red Barn', 'His Mother's Rosary' and many others. The touring players don't exist anymore but they certainly made an impact on a young McColgan.

"I remember seeing those live shows in the hall. I could afford to go in one night but not others so on those nights I used to stand outside and listen."

What McColgan describes is an idyllic rural upbringing with the most nurturing of authority figures from his teachers Ms. Baker and Mr. Lynch to next door neighbour Josephine O'Toole who had the most coveted of possessions in a rural Irish house in 1950s and 1960s - a radio.

"We didn't have a radio in the beginning so I used to go down to Mrs. O'Toole and listen to the Sunday night play with her. She would talk to me about it and explain it. She brought me to the pictures as the odd time and I have very fond memories of the O'Tooles, some of whom are still there."

On his recent trip through the county, McColgan stopped off in his old village, with his brother Gerry, to see his primary school and also pay a visit to another face from the past - local shopkeeper Jay Doyle. About five years ago, McColgan was driving by and spotted Mr. Doyle in the window, hardly believing that he was still there.

"He's been in that shop for 55 years and he refuses to close it. There was himself and the brother but the brother died and he's the last man standing now - he keeps it open for company really."

"He remembers me coming into the shop with my mother and buying things. He's still the exact same, with the brown coat, three biros sticking out of the pocket and he'd do up your bill in pencil on a brown bag. Nothing has changed, he doesn't have an electronic till or anything like that."

From the idyllic landscape of Tombrack, McColgan soon found himself back in Dublin where an encounter with the Christian Brothers' education regime ended his academic studies at the age of 14.

Although a reasonably good student and not troublesome, McColgan said that most men of

his generation would attest to the fact that in Christian Brother schools you got slapped quite a lot.

On one particular day, while reciting Latin declensions, he got one wrong and received two slaps of a big, black piece of leather.

"For every one you got one wrong you got two slaps but as soon as you got two slaps you forgot everything anyway. I eventually got twelve slaps - six on each hand - but I refused to cry. I remember it was winter time and my fingers swelled up. I had about a six mile bicycle ride home but I couldn't cycle the bike so I walked home on a very cold winter's evening.

"But during the walk I thought: 'That's it. I'm not going back. That's the end of that.'"

Despite his father's protestations and the Christian Brothers offering to waive school fees,



John McColgan with his brother Gerry paid a visit to Tombrack National School, where John went to school until he was 12 years of age before moving to Dublin. Pic: John Walsh



John McColgan pictured with his old friend Jay Doyle when he paid a visit to Tombrack. Pic: John Walsh

McColgan stuck to his word and did not go back though, in considering his father's reaction now, he wonders how he would react if his own son came home and said similar!

McColgan proceeded to work in a factory, a grocer's, shoe shops and pubs before getting into Radio Eireann as a boy messenger and finally into RTE at the age of 17.

"When I went to Dublin I really wanted to be an actor, I was in amateur drama, I did a lot of the

Young Dublin Players works and I do remember auditioning for the Abbey eventually. I got the audition but I got a job as a vision mixer in RTE at the same time so I was conflicted but not too much. I think the Abbey paid young actors two pounds a week and RTE paid 12 so it wasn't too hard a choice!"

He climbed the ranks in RTE as a producer/director and held the role of Head of Entertainment for Network 2 towards the end of his 20 years stint in the organisation

and then a role in TV:AM in the UK. During his time in TV he rubbed shoulders with big names such as David Frost, Michael Parkinson and Henry Kelly amongst others.

"I loved the role in entertainment but I think entertainment has changed a lot and probably not for the better. It's now dominated by reality TV, dance shows, X-Factors and all those kind of shows. The sort of show I would have done would have been a mix

John McColgan

Wexford and Riverdance

of variety and singing, dancing, special acts and all that kind of thing."

He still provides some input into Irish television entertainment through his production company Tyrone Productions which has been responsible for shows such as: 'Quirke', 'Ros Na Rún', 'The All Ireland Talent Show', 'Music Factory' and 'My Father's War'.

But, as Mayor of Wexford Cllr. Frank Staples put it on the night of the exhibition launch: "It takes most people all their life to become famous but John did it in seven minutes!"

The impact of Riverdance across the world is well documented and plans are already being made to celebrate its 25th anniversary in 2019. Indeed, it is still considered as one of the few moments where an interval act upstaged the actual competing performers at a Eurovision Song Contest.

The show grew out of McColgan's work on another show, Mayo 5000, in which he had featured Michael Flatley and Jean Butler in separate routines - both got a great reaction.

"I remember saying to my wife Moya [Doherty] that we must do something further with them. We were thinking of maybe doing a documentary about Irish dancing and its influence in America. Then she was asked to produce that year's Eurovision Song Con-



Amed Alhalw, who was badly injured during the 2014 war in Gaza. (Photo: John McColgan)

test at The Point.

"It was fresh in her mind so she brought Flatley and Butler together, got Bill Whelan to write the score and got Mavis Ascot and

Flatley to choreograph that centrepiece. That was the beginning of it."

With over 4,000 people from all over the world packed into the

point on the night of the Eurovision Song Contest, McColgan described it as a great focus group because it was something most of them had never seen before.

"Without knowing what it was or having any connection to Irish culture they all jumped to their feet in applause. Something happened on that night that gave us the confidence to go forward and put together a full show."

Riverdance is constantly on tour and will be back in the Gaiety in June and July. It is currently touring America, has just finished in China, and is going to Europe next year.

Plans are also afoot for another new show as later this month McColgan is due to meet with the Cameron Pace Group, a James Cameron company that produced the 3D effects for his film 'Avatar'.

"They want to cover 'Heartbeat of Home', the second show I did, in 3D. They've done U2, Justin Bieber and a few other movies already. They saw 'Heartbeat' in Shanghai two years ago and wanted to do it so that's shooting this time next year."

So from Wexford to the world,

McColgan's latest role is as an Ambassador for Trocaire which brings him to parts of the world that he wouldn't have seen in his previous projects. In April of last year, he and his brother Gerry travelled to Palestine to work on a photography exhibition that would chronicle the every day lives of Palestinian people.

"The object of this exercise was to raise awareness of Trocaire's work and specifically Palestine. I had done as much advance research as I could but it doesn't prepare you for what you see and feel on the ground. There is no doubt that when the country was divided there was a notional line down the middle.

"Now the Israelis, over the last 50 years, have planted Jewish settlers that have just taken the land and there's about 800,000 Israelis now living in what was Palestine land."

The settlements, he remarked, looked like shopping malls in Marbella and were populated by Australian, English and American people. Strategically planted, he pointed out; they were to ensure that Palestine could not have a consistent land mass.

The exhibition focuses mainly

on portraits of people living in Palestine and how the conflict has affected them. With captions telling the stories, the exhibition acts as a narrative of the human cost of conflict.

"The Palestinians are really resilient, lovely sweet people who are good to talk to. You come away feeling really shocked - you can't believe what you're seeing and that one person would do this to another."

Amongst those he met were a couple who had lost three children, another woman who had seen 11 of her extended family killed, an olive farmer whose trees had been knocked down and a Bedouin child who was traumatised by an incident two years earlier where Israeli soldiers burst into his house firing shots.

"Gaza is a very third world area - it's cut off and the Palestinians are in there - they can't get out. The UN says the infrastructure is so bad that by 2020 it will be unsustainable as a place for people to live and there will be a threat of famine.

"It's a tinderbox. Gaza is an open-air prison. Some day it is going to explode."



Echo reporter Anna Hayes interviewed John McColgan during his recent trip to Wexford for the opening of the 'This Is Palestine' exhibition.