NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Actor's play exposes Irish hell

Retta Blaney | Jan. 13, 2012

Gerard Mannix Flynn in "James X"

The middle-aged man entering the waiting room with a bulging manila folder looks anxious. In his sage-colored pants and jacket, white shirt with no tie, he appears as bland as the room, which is empty but for a straight chair and a sign with an arrow pointing to the left. It is the words on that sign, though, that indicate any trace of blandness is only superficial. White letters on a blue background foreshadow the fire beneath the surface: Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse.

?I have to go into that courtroom soon, into my past,? the man known as James X says as he waits to be a witness before an Irish government tribunal?s inquiry into institutional child abuse. ?Tell them what happened back then when I was 11, but I just want to run and run and run.?

In his one-man play, ?James X,? Gerard Mannix Flynn reveals one harrowing incident after another of physical and sexual abuse in Ireland?s Catholic and state institutions. A popular and critical success when it premiered in Dublin in 2009, it is playing at Manhattan?s 45 Bleecker Street at least through Dec. 18. Given the subject and its high-profile backers, I can easily see it traveling from New York to other American cities -- Boston and Philadelphia, to name two.

In the play?s foreword, Flynn, who first introduced the character of James in his 1983 novel, *Nothing to Say*, holds agents of the church and state accountable -- ?a church that profited from the forced manual labor of 150,000 children, and a state that supplied them with these child workers,? he writes. ?This is not James? story, it is the story of all the children that went through to rooms of hell and horror in institutions run by the congregations of religious brothers and nuns, under the license of the state. It is the story of those who suffered in these cruel places and those who were witness to that suffering. We all had a childhood. Let this be our common bond when we read ?James X? or *Nothing to Say*.?

Flynn?s journey through the system began when he was 11 and was sent to St. Joseph?s Industrial School in Letterfrack in the 1960s. James X?s travails begin similarly and lead to stints in reform school, prison and a mental institution, and 20 years of alcoholism. He was beaten and molested by priests, nuns and most especially Christian Brothers.

Produced in New York by Irish-born actors Liam Neeson and Gabriel Byrne and off-Broadway?s Culture Project, and directed by Byrne, ?James X? is an intermission-less 80-minute journey into hell, a hell endured by countless Irish children, one of whom was Flynn, who spent 15 years writing this play.

While waiting to give testimony before Ireland?s High Court, James reads aloud the file, which he has just received, the case history that was compiled on him over the years by doctors, psychiatrists, welfare officers and others, reports filled with lies, inaccuracies and indifference, reports that sentenced him to a life of horrendous abuse. Realizing the irony of trying to expect justice from this same prejudicial system, James looks back over his life to find the truth, which Flynn tells and often acts, usually at manic pace, with dark humor and occasionally in rhyme.

Born in Dublin in 1957, Flynn looks a decade older than his 54 years. After too many years of silence, his passion to uncork the memories of cruelty and inhumanity he and others suffered explodes in a nonstop monologue that leaves him frequently mopping perspiration from his face with a handkerchief. Nothing stands between him and his character.

The novel *Nothing to Say* is the story of James O?Neill, later to be James X in the play, a child sent away by the courts to an industrial school. ?Even at that time, these industrial schools and reform schools were places that sent a shudder of fear through Irish society,? he writes in the foreword to ?James X.? ?They were situated in the heart of Irish towns and villages, and many people must have known what went on there, yet nobody openly talked about it. Nobody really talked about sex, never mind child sex abuse, and to level the accusation of abuse at the state and the church and their religious congregations was an outrage.

?Twenty years on, Irish society is on the verge of moral bankruptcy. The Catholic church and its congregation is breaking up upon is own rock, by its own hands and deeds, by its own lack of honesty. It is nothing more than floating debris, and all that keeps it from sinking down into the darkness is the tissue of lies and the frightened faithful who cling to these lies. The issues brought up by *Nothing to Say* are still unfinished business, unhealed wounds.?

The play?s premiere in New York is timely. *The Irish Times* reported Dec. 8 that a state-sponsored report accused Dublin?s former archbishop, John Charles McQuaid, one of Ireland?s most powerful prelates before his death in 1973, of serial child sexual abuse.

The performance is accompanied by ?Impact,? an exhibit of Flynn?s work related to child abuse in Ireland?s institutions that takes viewers through James X?s journey from age 6 to the present. ?James X? and this exhibit are part of ?Imagine Ireland,? a yearlong initiative of Irish art in the United States presented by the Irish government?s Culture Ireland agency.

My request for interviews with Flynn and Byrne was denied. Flynn, who besides being a playwright, actor and visual artist is also a former independent councilor for the South East Inner City area in Dublin, did speak with the *Irish Examiner* in 2010 to discuss the motivation behind his play and exhibition.

?The Irish are a triumphant people,? he said, ?who have overcome dreadful events throughout our history and now we need to take ultimate and complete responsibility for what happened, move forward and let the trauma resolve itself.?

[Retta Blaney is the author of *Working on the Inside: The Spiritual Life Through the Eyes of Actors*.]

Source URL (retrieved on *03/09/2014 - 12:56*): http://ncronline.org/news/actors-play-exposes-irish-hell