

Kate Bassett:

Hello everyone. Thank you very much for coming to this pre-show talk. I'm Kate Bassett and I'm the Literary Associate here at Chichester Festival Theatre. And it's a great delight to have Rachel O'Riordan here tonight, who is the director of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. Should I just do a little introduction? So you are not only the director, you are also Artistic Director of the Lyric Hammersmith in London and the CEO as well, I think, and previously ran the Sherman theatre in Cardiff. And I think you founded a company, didn't you, called Ransom?

Rachel O'Riordan:

I did.

Kate Bassett:

Is that right? In Belfast?

Rachel O'Riordan:

You've done your research.

Kate Bassett:

I have. In Belfast, in the 00s where you, interestingly, planted lots of really interesting new writers as well, I think, including a guy called David Ireland, who's an amazing writer. This one is by another earlier amazing writer, Martin McDonagh.

Kate Bassett:

So do you want to start with what drew you to this play or what you find fascinating about it? Or what drew you first to it, if that's a different thing?

Rachel O'Riordan:

Sure. It's a funny thing about plays cause sometimes what draws you to them in the first instance... I mean, I've been aware of this play for 15 years. And so I loved... It sounds mad. It sounds quite simplistic, but I loved the title, and I think maybe in a way that an audience member, somebody who's thinking of going to see a play, might be drawn to a title. I was drawn to the title. I thought "That's fantastic. I wonder what that's about?" So that was the first thing. And it drew me as a title, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. And it just kind of says something and it makes you curious about what that is. So that was the first thing.

Rachel O'Riordan:

And then I read it, of course, and I was taken by how accurately it captured an Irish sense of humour, which is quite mordant and quite dark. And I remember thinking, "I bet you these people who've directed this play... I don't know if they're brogues. I've actually never seen it. I bet you this has been directed as a kind of thigh-slapping comedy, and I'd really like to have a go at it and bring my own knowledge of Ireland as an Irish person and how Irish people do actually do make each other laugh, and see how the play opens up in that frame." So that was why I wanted to do it.

Rachel O'Riordan:

And also, McDonagh is an extraordinary playwright and his handling of character and dialogue is just so exceptional. You want to get your hands on something like that. And also it's a tricky play because it walks a line between comedy and tragedy. And that sounds like a really trite thing for a director to say, right? A lot of plays do do that. But it does it in such an extreme way, and without any spoiler, is

where we end up at the end of the play feels like it's such a massive journey from the beginning. So technically, as a director, it's a really hard thing to do, because the beginning of the play really doesn't give away the end. It hints at it, but it doesn't give it away. And it happens fast. It's a fast play. It's quick. So that was why it was technically challenging. I was intrigued by the world it created.

Kate Bassett:

That's really interesting. One of the things I thought as I was watching it, because it was written in 1996... Do you feel as if it is both an interesting period piece about Irishness or the other themes that it deals with, or do you think it's resonant now? Or both?

Rachel O'Riordan:

Both. I thought it was '95, but...

Kate Bassett:

Maybe it was first done in London in '96.

Rachel O'Riordan:

First performed in '96. Yeah. And the only reason I say that is because Ireland in 1995 was pre-Celtic Tiger. And that happened very shortly afterwards. Three years later, it's the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland in '98, and you have an Ireland then that is starting to move into a new phase. But that hadn't happened yet in '95. So I think it's one of those plays that really wouldn't work if you tried to set it in a different era than it's written. It wouldn't work now. Ireland has changed. If I tried to do a production set in 2021, it would not work. The sensibility of the play is very much embedded into the time that Ireland was in in the mid-'90s. It was still economically very difficult. Ireland was not in a strong place economically and still in thrall to the Catholic church. Divorce, not common. Equal marriage, not allowed. Abortion, not allowed. And, as I say, pre-Good Friday Agreement, which, though that happened in the North, had a huge impact on Ireland as an island. So '95 was a very strange time in Ireland. Yeah.

Kate Bassett:

I remember I was in London in the 1990s and I remember there were lots of Irish builders and things. And actually, in the play, it touches on that doesn't it? That sort of immigrating to London. What is the situation now? I suppose I was wondering how it is now after COVID. And maybe you don't know, but I just wondered what had happened to the Celtic Tiger in a way, I suppose, my question is.

Rachel O'Riordan:

Well, there was a huge crash after the Celtic Tiger because Ireland is not country, for lots of reasons, that was used to having money. And when the Celtic Tiger happened... And Ireland was, at one point, madly, one of the richest countries in Europe. And it was just this kind of incredible wealth that people weren't used to having. And there was a lot of bad mistakes made at government-level and at human level, and people lost everything. People lost their homes in their thousands. The crash was devastating.

Rachel O'Riordan:

Ireland now has been really badly hit by the pandemic, like everyone, like everywhere, economically. But the Taoiseach who has just completed term, Leo Varadkar... I mean, it's extraordinary to me as somebody who was born from a working class family, Catholic, Cork City, and my family got moved

to Leeds, which you will see in the play, is an exact replica of Maureen's own experience, for work. And the Taoiseach in the Republic of Ireland, until recently, was a man called Leo Varadkar, who is both mixed heritage and gay and out as a gay man. This would have been unimaginable at the island that we are here in this play. Unimaginable.

Rachel O'Riordan:

And so the journey that Ireland has gone on has been so rapid that I think there's a lot that Ireland is struggling with. But there's also huge confidence in Ireland now. I'm old enough to remember being a kid and seeing Irish jokes on the TV. Like Jim What's-His-Name, that horrible man with blonde hair, the guy-

Kate Bassett:

Davidson.

Rachel O'Riordan:

That's him. That guy making Irish jokes. You know, "An Englishman, an Irishman, and a Scotsman go into a bar." And the joke was always that the Irishman would do something sick. And I grew up listening to that on the TV and people going "Thick Mick" and calling you a "Paddy." And the equation of Ireland and stupidity, Irish people and stupidity was very... And some of you guys will definitely be old enough to remember that. And I grew up with that in my ears and made me really angry. And I can't imagine that happening now. This generation of Irish people 20 years younger than me who are just like "Really? People used to think being Irish was to be equated to stupidity?" They don't even know about it, which is brilliant. But that was an absolute theme.

Rachel O'Riordan:

And as you say, the builders, who came to lots of cities in England but very many of them came to build the roads in London, many of them would have come from areas like Connemara as Pato Dooley does in this play because the economic situation was so desperate in Ireland. There was no work. Nothing. And so the option to go and build the roads in London was there and they took it, a lot of them. And some of them are 14, 15 years old and going under the radar, being paid cash in hand, going over because their big brother was there or going over because their cousin was there, going over because their dad was there, and having really no option. And going under the radar, being paid cash in hand, not having National insurance number, not being part of the system here to get medical care, not having a British passport. And some of those men have only died recently, and a lot of them died homeless. And there's a place set up in Camden called Arlington House, which is specifically for Irish people in distress. Men, largely. A lot of that generation are now dead and the last of them are dying, but there was a great debt owed to Ireland by England for a lot of that labour that was done. And, I think, a debt that could usefully be acknowledged.

Kate Bassett:

Yeah, that's interesting. The flip side of the question would be, obviously, this play, since it aired in the '90s, has been in Australia and Broadway and America and other countries as well. I hit on a website and it was in possibly Polish. I'm not sure.

Rachel O'Riordan:

Yeah, yeah. It's done a lot.

Kate Bassett:

What do you think it's international, or why do you think it's resonant outside Ireland?

Rachel O'Riordan:

Oh, I think family, right? It's the mother-daughter relationship, is the main thing. I think wherever you're from, that will resonate. The frustration, and also a sense of... I'd be really interested to see a Polish production of that because Poland is a country that has struggled economically and the idea of wanting to escape and not having the resources to do so, wanting something more and not having the resources within the country you live in order to be able to advance yourself, I think that is a big reason. And also it's really funny. And now I do wonder how the comedy would translate, actually, into Polish language. But I'm sure it does.

Rachel O'Riordan:

I think it's family, and it's also this really humane play about thwarted ambition, loneliness, that sense of "I've left it too late now to do the thing I want to do." There's, I think, a great piece in the play where Maureen says "I'm 40 years old for feck's sake." And you know, you get the sense that she's been doing the same thing, and she's aware that she's letting time trickle by. And then she sees an opportunity and she goes for it. She goes for the opportunity. I won't say what happens in case you don't know the play, but I think we can all relate to that: the sense of loss that we should have done something and didn't do it in time.

Kate Bassett:

Yeah. I was going to say, in some ways, it would resonate with any kind of backwater in the world as well, wouldn't it? But actually when you were talking, I was thinking, "Oh, she's kind of locked down."

Rachel O'Riordan:

I definitely thought that, yeah.

Kate Bassett:

Actually resonates with being stuck in a house with someone for too long, doesn't it?

Rachel O'Riordan:

Absolutely. Me and my mom get on really well, but I did the first three months of lockdown in Coleraine where my mom lives now. And I was sort of doing some research for this play at the time, and I was thinking "It's getting remarkably similar." Just when you're together all the time and there's not enough other stimulus. And that's what happens in this play. They're in a place called Leenane. There is nothing to do. It's like a lot of... Anybody who's been to Ireland... A lot of small Irish rural villages, there will be a shop, three pubs, that's it. And there's nothing to do. And Maureen doesn't have a job. She doesn't have something to do with her time. Neither does Mag. They have this, I suppose, some sort of small holding, you would call it. They've got some hands. But they don't do anything. So they're falling on each other all the time and that doesn't work for them, to put it mildly.

Kate Bassett:

Just with the news last night, I was thinking about... Care is an issue, isn't it? Caring. Home care.

Rachel O'Riordan:

That's true, actually.

Kate Bassett:

I suddenly went, "Gosh, that's suddenly very resonant this week."

Rachel O'Riordan:

Very resonant this week. And it's actually heartbreaking in the play because Mag, the mother... It's an ongoing theme in the play that she's worried "Who will look after me? Who will look after me? Who will look after me?" And she's so frightened of being left on her own. But more than that, she's frightened of being put in a home and rightly so in the '90s, I would suspect, in Ireland. And she fiercely wants to retain her independence. But really she's not independent. She's co-dependent. Hugely so, with Maureen. So she can't actually manage on her own. And I think there is a metaphor in there about England and Ireland actually, and about independence and disentangling oneself from something that is no longer useful and is actually suppressing you. I think it's in the play. And I think what's also in the play is Ireland's own fighting within our own selves and our own civil war. And they are almost like a microcosm of Protestant and Catholic Ireland kind of going at each other.

Kate Bassett:

Yeah. So, naturally, I'd forgotten, because there's a long time since I've seen a previous production, that Maureen is actually quite politicised, isn't she?

Rachel O'Riordan:

She is.

Kate Bassett:

Given how you primarily remember it as a domestic drama, I was like, "Oh yeah, I'd actually forgotten that.. "

Rachel O'Riordan:

Yeah. We make something of that in this production. Yeah. She talks about England and Ireland. It's funny, but that's McDonagh. He's great because the politics is in a Trojan horse of comedy a lot of the time. It's great. Rather than going "Here's the political bit."

Kate Bassett:

Yeah. Should we talk a little bit about the process of getting a production on stage, this one or more generally, if you want to? I suppose I thought I might start with casting. How early do you start? Was there anything that you were thinking about particularly about casting or not? Do you just wait to see who auditions?

Rachel O'Riordan:

You do wait to see who auditions. You do. But with this play, I had a couple of people that I'd worked... Well, I've worked with Orla before once and I always thought I'd like to work with Orla again.

Kate Bassett:

Who is playing the daughter.

Rachel O'Riordan:

Sorry, who's playing Maureen. And she and I did a production of actually another Irish play called

The Weir, a Conor McPherson play, when I was still in Cardiff at the Tobacco Factory in Bristol. And we had a really great time working together. Well, I did. I hope she'd agree.

Kate Bassett:

Some of you have probably seen The Weir when it was here, didn't you?

Rachel O'Riordan:

Oh, yeah. And it's a beautiful play. And Orla... Sometimes with actors you think "Oh it would be nice to work together again on something." And we did.

Rachel O'Riordan:

Adam Best, who plays Pato, is an actor whose work I've seen and really admired. Kwaku was a brilliant surprise. I'd seen him in one thing, but I had never met him. So he came in auditions. And Ingrid Craigie is an extraordinary actor, as you will see, and in Ireland is really well known, as they all are, actually. And sort of not so known, I imagine, in the same famous way that she is in Ireland, and it's just brilliant. It's instinct, casting. It's instinct, and Daniel and I, who's the Artistic Director here, as you know, I'm sure, he and I talked about casting together, so that was a shared journey.

Kate Bassett:

And maybe we'll go back to the sets in a sec. I suppose I was wondering how that linked in with when you're saying in some ways it's a tricky play in terms of the dark comedy. Is there any way of working through that in rehearsals or is that hard to talk about or is it...?

Rachel O'Riordan:

No. Rehearsals are funny. You've planned them up to a point, and then it's very much about the chemistry in the room and who you're working with. And I try and create a really ambitious atmosphere and I try and create an atmosphere where an actor feels that they are given the space, the support, and, if you like, the push to go somewhere that they haven't maybe gone before. So for me, a rehearsal isn't about going, "You stand there. You stand there." That stuff all works itself out in the end. And normally I leave that quite late. For me, a rehearsal is about going, "What's the big vision of this play? Where's the pulse of it? What's it really about?"

Rachel O'Riordan:

My job really, in a nutshell, is to make every actor I work with the best they've ever been. And for them to feel that they're the best they've ever been. And sometimes that journey means some difficult beats along the road, because you're pushing an actor towards something more. But with great actors, which these four are, it always feels like they want that, really. They don't want to be safe, actually. Really good actors don't want to be safe. Really good actors want to be scared in rehearsals and thrilled and exhilarated and going, "Oh my God, this is really big." Or "This is a bigger play than I realised." Or "This is a bigger part than I realised. Oh my God, I didn't realise I had this in me." And all of that, that's my job, is to try and inspire that in them, no matter what I'm directing, be it an English play, an Irish play, Ibsen. It doesn't matter. It's always that. So that kind of goes beyond what the play itself is.

Rachel O'Riordan:

And I love working with actors. It's my favourite thing about being a director. I suppose some directors would say, "Oh, I really love design." And some actors would say "I'm a new writing specialist, and I love that, and developing plays." I do love all those things too, but my most best

thing is the alchemy between an actor and a text, and then what happens in that rehearsal room, and then the bit where they meet you. So it's actors that I really do it for, if you like. That's the kind of thing that gets me out of bed.

Kate Bassett:

It's a very, very sociable industry, isn't it? Extraordinarily so.

Rachel O'Riordan:

Or it used to be.

Kate Bassett:

Well, it used to be, yeah. I was just thinking when you said that how much he must've missed that. But no, that's what I'm saying. Well because you're a director, so obviously you are still directing it, but that it has become a more democratic process and less... I don't know. I feel as if, in the 1950s, it would be like, "You stand over there" a bit more. And that it's more negotiated.

Rachel O'Riordan:

I think so, yeah.

Kate Bassett:

Is that true, or?

Rachel O'Riordan:

I think that's totally true. I have said "Do you want to stand over there?" of course, on occasion. But if you're not interested in what an actor wants to share with you in the room, then you're not really very good. If you just come in and go, "This is what I want," then there's no point in being in rehearsals. If that was all it was, I could do it in 10 days, if it was just about "Stand there and stand there."

Kate Bassett:

Yeah, that's interesting. So in terms of when you're preparing, presumably you have an idea of it, but you're still open-minded in a slightly paradoxical way.

Rachel O'Riordan:

Totally.

Kate Bassett:

Yeah.

Rachel O'Riordan:

I reckon actually that's probably particular to every director. I'm very much like that. I do prepare. Of course I prepare. But I don't decide, if that makes sense. I feel that my job is to come into the room knowing the play really, really well, and to have a vision for it. I need to have something to say on day one to make the actors excited and to give some clarity. I think it would be really unfair of a director to come in and go, "Hey guys, I don't really know what this is. Let's just find it together." I think that's not fair on the actors. You need to provide some kind of "Look, this is the craic. This is the vision for it." And then on that journey, everything is possible.

Kate Bassett:

Yeah. So broad kind of springboard that they can bounce off. Yeah. I would say, actually, when I watch things, sometimes the biggest thrill is the surprise. Having me going, "Oh, right. I've not seen it like that before." That's obviously part of the director, but also a collective thing, isn't it? That a particular actor will go, "Oh, that's not how I envisioned that character, but that's really interesting that you've done it that way."

Rachel O'Riordan:

Yeah. Yeah, I think there's no one way to do any play. There really isn't. Beckett would probably disagree and say, "Yes there is. Look, I've written it down." But in fact, I probably think he definitely would say that, actually, because he did. He said, "This is how you do it." And actually it met its kind of apex as an intellectual decision with *Not I* when you've got Billie Whitelaw in that famous film where she's in a head brace. You can't get more prescriptive than that, in putting an actor in a head brace and they can't even turn their head to left or right. And it's just her mouth saying the words, and saying the words in exactly the right rhythm. I would have no interest in directing that. Not a bit.

Kate Bassett:

It's very interesting, isn't it? I think he's an amazing writer, but somehow that's actually undermined his legacy.

Rachel O'Riordan:

I think that's right.

Kate Bassett:

Because it's "Well, do I want to go and see the same show again?"

Rachel O'Riordan:

I think that's right. This is going to sound like a big name drop, so forgive me. But when I was starting out, I did one show, my first show. I was lucky. It did really well, and it came to London from Belfast. It was the show for the company you were describing: *Ransom*. And this is the new writing company I set up when I was in my twenties. And I brought this show into London and it was a big success. And Peter Hall came to see it. And he, brilliantly, God rest him... He saw the show and he gave me a job, and in Bath, just up the road, I think.

Kate Bassett:

Bath Theatre Royal.

Rachel O'Riordan:

Yeah. Bath Theatre Royal.

Kate Bassett:

The season.

Rachel O'Riordan:

Yeah. And I directed a production of *Miss Julie*, but he was directing *Waiting for Godot*. And I remember thinking "Why would he want to?" But of course he directed the first production. And he was so fascinating about that. I was so lucky to hear from him why that was interesting. Because the first time you have a playwright going, "No, it's two seconds on that pause, and then one, and then

half, and then..." And getting it right. And Peter loves music, so he saw it as a score that you have to get right. And his patience. Because I used to watch sometimes him rehearsing *Waiting for Godot* with these brilliant four actors and it was literally like orchestration. So going "Stop. No, too quick. Nope. Nope. No." He would go, "No." He wouldn't even look at them. He would go, "No. One beat. Good. On you go." I was like, "God." It was just forensic.

Kate Bassett:

So it's kind of conducting. Yeah. I'm also slightly taking back what I say, because I think it's still remarkable, even within that rigour, how an actor can get little differences just by intonation or by being them, that they have a different personality inside them.

Rachel O'Riordan:

I think that's true.

Kate Bassett:

And in a way, I do think Beckett was incredibly musical, and so it was kind of right. But the whole Beckett Estate business is a nightmare because people try and put it on and I don't know if they still do, but they did, for a while after his death, sort of ban any novel staging concept.

Kate Bassett:

Let's talk about the stage concept.

Rachel O'Riordan:

Talk about staging. Okay.

Kate Bassett:

Tell me about the process of working with set designers and how that works through the pre-rehearsal period and maybe what you discussed with this? Could I just mention that the design team are called the Good Teeth Theatre Company?

Rachel O'Riordan:

Yeah.

Kate Bassett:

Good Teeth Theatre. I'm assuming that's not a lone designer.

Rachel O'Riordan:

It's not a lone designer. This is, I think, James Perkins, his idea, which is making a design collective, and it's an idea that was cooked up during the lockdown. And I think it's in order to make it possible for designers to accept more work, because oftentimes a designer will have to turn down a whole gig because they're not free for, say, four days in the tech week and they lose the whole job because of that. So the idea of a collective is that somebody like me who is hiring a designer would agree that I'm not just hiring one person. I'm hiring, say, all five of them. And they will all be so aware of each other's design work that if one of them isn't able to come, say, for three days during the tech week, the other one will come. And someone like me won't have a tantrum about that I will have agreed. So this was a trial. This is their first gig as a collective.

Kate Bassett:

It's really unusual. I'm saying, "Wow. Wow."

Rachel O'Riordan:

It is. And I think more power to them, because freelancers have had it really hard in the pandemic and freelance theatre artists have had it really hard. So anything that makes great people like James and his team survive this, I'm here to support. And I find it really brilliant to have lots of people. I think the concept is they'll have a lead designer on each project, but the others in the team will be there to support.

Kate Bassett:

So I have your own GP, but then you can see someone else who consults the notes in detail.

Rachel O'Riordan:

I think that's exactly right. Yeah.

Kate Bassett:

Okay. And what did you discuss, if it-

Rachel O'Riordan:

Well, the biggest thing we did was made the decision not to do... There is an iconic image of what Ireland is, and it's a thatched cottage and it's whitewashed walls, right? And a little red door. And it's quite cute. And you hear of Connemara and you'd be thinking, "Oh, that will be what it is, and it'll be this sort of thatched, whitewashed, red-doored cottage." As you can see, that's not what happened. We were really keen not to do that because it's set in 1995. It's not set in the 1920s. And whilst those cottages and stuff do still exist there, I was very, very determined not to do... Probably because I'm Irish, I didn't want to do anything that was "stage Irish" and serve up an image of Ireland that's palatable.

Rachel O'Riordan:

This is a place in an economic slump in the country I'm from. An economic slump that, in Connemara, this area in which the play is set, was worse almost than anywhere else. They're in Mayo and Mullingar. And the economics of Ireland are connected to the famine, which is connected to English occupation of Ireland. So I didn't want to sanitise it and make it sweet because it isn't sweet. It's not a sweet play. And I wanted to really tell the story of Ireland's economic state in '95 and how, in rural Ireland, there literally was no work in great suedes.

Rachel O'Riordan:

And the part of Ireland in which McDonagh sets the Leenane Trilogy, because there's three of the plays in the trilogy, The Lieutenant of Inishmore and The Cripple of Inishmaan being the other two... Connemara was an area that was devastated by the famine and emigration. So it is still now, in 2021, hugely underpopulated. Hugely underpopulated. And that's because we have no immigration because there was no jobs to come to Ireland for. And so we didn't have any immigration until quite recently, and huge emigration. So you have these very empty villages. Hardly anyone there. It's very lonely. Connemara's a very lonely, sad place. So I wanted to show that rather than going, "Hello! Ha ha! Isn't it cute? Little leprechauns everywhere." It was a real kind of decision not to do that.

Rachel O'Riordan:

And also it's funny. The play's funny, but it's not...

Kate Bassett:  
It's not cute.

Rachel O'Riordan:  
It's not cute. And it's not "stage Irish." And their accents are Connemara accents, not a sort of... You hear a lot of Irish accents, not so much on stage actually, because stage actors tend to be really assiduous in their work, but you do hear some really bad Irish accents on film. And you're like, "I don't know where that is, but it's nowhere I've ever been." And it's always quite a little sweet little thing like this. And I'm going, "What is that?" So we were very much going for an antidote to that.

Rachel O'Riordan:  
But I'm making it sound really depressing, but it is still really funny. But it's trying to capture the reality of these people's lives rather than a version of it. So that was why it looks pretty grim up here.

Kate Bassett:  
It is very funny. And I kind of love the fact that when you're talking about "It's very Irish"... I don't think this is a spoiler: There are some Kimberley biscuits in the play that I'm not familiar with as an English person, particularly. I'm assuming they're more Irish than English.

Rachel O'Riordan:  
They are hugely so, yeah.

Kate Bassett:  
But you completely get it doesn't matter. It's completely transferrable humour.

Rachel O'Riordan:  
Well, good. I'm glad. Kimberley biscuits are an Irish biscuit and genuinely they are disgusting. I just genuinely don't know why they make them. They're absolutely foul. I remember having them as a kid and being like, "Ugh." But yeah, everyone keeps buying them. It's really odd. In Ireland, the Kimberley biscuit joke would have them rolling in the aisles. My suspicion is here, it would be like, because nobody knows. And I think-

Kate Bassett:  
The rhythm of it is funny.

Rachel O'Riordan:  
[crosstalk 00:31:29] If you're in Ireland you have a proper sense memory of how disgusting they are. I will describe the Kimberley biscuit to you. It is two bits of brown squashy kind of... I don't know. You wouldn't even call it pastry, or you wouldn't even call it biscuit. It's kind of sponge and it's very thin. And then in between these two squashy bits of sponge is more sponge, which is almost like a marshmallow, but worse. It's kind of a harder marshmallow. Honestly, it's like somebody sat down and went, "Let's just make something really disgusting and call it a biscuit." And they're in everyone's house. You go to your granny's and you're going, "Would like your biscuit?" And she'll open the tin: "Oh, crap. Kimberleys." And it's such a thing in Ireland.

Rachel O'Riordan:

And there's this brilliant bit in the play which I think is very funny where the young fellow Ray says, "I do love Kimberleys." Now in Ireland, people would just be pissing themselves laughing because nobody likes Kimberleys, is the thing. I'm interested to see if it does actually translate.

Kate Bassett:

I just love the way the Kimberley biscuit keeps turning up.

Rachel O'Riordan:

Keeps turning up.

Kate Bassett:

I apologise to anyone who loves these, but for me, the equivalent would be a Waggon Wheel.

Rachel O'Riordan:

Waggon Wheels are much better. But I would say they have some shared DNA there.

Kate Bassett:

There's a weird stale squeakiness to it.

Rachel O'Riordan:

That's actually quite true. Imagine a Waggon Wheel without the chocolate on it, and you're halfway to how awful a Kimberley is. I feel like we should have one. [inaudible 00:33:02] show you.

Kate Bassett:

Everyone should have them at the end of the show.

Rachel O'Riordan:

You can buy them on Amazon, which is what we had to do for the show, because of course you can't buy them in England. Quite right, too. Why would you?

Kate Bassett:

I can't believe this has actually turned into brand sales of Kimberley biscuits. On that note, it's question time. There's a lady in the front row here.

Speaker 1:

Could you please describe the loud sound effects at the beginning of Act 2?

Rachel O'Riordan:

Oh yes, yes, yes. After the interval?

Speaker 1:

Yes.

Rachel O'Riordan:

Yes, because Pato has moved to London. So it's the sound of London and drilling and cars. Yeah. And it was kind of meant to be really unpleasant to actually to give a sense of Pato's life over there. Yeah.

Kate Bassett:

Okay. Yeah. Thank you. There's one right there.

Speaker 2:

The first point is that you should have the Kimberley biscuits on the bar at half time.

Rachel O'Riordan:

I think that's a good idea, actually.

Kate Bassett:

We could make loads of money by selling them now.

Speaker 2:

And how do you approach the cadence and rhythm of Irish English?

Rachel O'Riordan:

Oh, that's a great question. I can totally answer that one. And we did quite a lot of work on that. The reason: they have a different syntactical rhythm. Like there's a line that Pato says was "I do do what I'm told I do." If you do speak Irish, I don't know if anybody in the room does, the sentence structure, the grammatical structure of Irish is different. So your object in the sentence is in a different place than it is in the English language. So oftentimes when it sounds to an English here that Irish people are speaking sort of strangely, it's because oftentimes, particularly older people, they might have had Irish as their first language. So they're speaking in a second language. So syntactically, the object and the action of the sentence are the other way around.

Rachel O'Riordan:

So, for example, in English, you would say, "My name is Rachel." In Irish, you would say either "Is mise Rachel" which means "I am Rachel," or "ainm dom Rachel" which means "My name is Rachel." But you would use them differently depending on the context that you were using them in. So "ainm dom" will be much more formal. "Is mise" will be more friendly. So there's a separation in the idea of your name and yourself. So things like that. So I think we actually did talk about the fact that there's an inherited pattern of speaking that comes from Irish language. So that's why it sounds different.

Kate Bassett:

That's really fascinating. So the object is-

Rachel O'Riordan:

The other way.

Kate Bassett:

... sometimes in another place.

Rachel O'Riordan:

Yeah, absolutely. So in English you would say, "I am cold" with the subject at the end, always starting with the "I" in English. You often start with the "I am this" or "I am that." In Irish, not so much. So you would say "Tá fuar orm" which translates literally as there is cold on me. So if an Irish person, particularly, say, my granny, might have said something like that. "It's cold, I am," she would have said, rather than "I am cold."

Kate Bassett:

That's really fascinating because that explains so much about the kind of lyricism of it.

Rachel O'Riordan:

It just that it quite sounds strange sometime.

Kate Bassett:

I was actually talking to Daniel about the use of "do," and he was saying... Because he's Welsh-speaking as well, and he said that happens in Wales as well.

Rachel O'Riordan:

Yeah, yeah.

Kate Bassett:

Yeah. It's really interesting. Probably because of something in Welsh, I imagine, as well. Yes.

Speaker 3:

Did you read the other two plays in the trilogy before you did this play?

Rachel O'Riordan:

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Just not because I wanted to do them.

Speaker 3:

Did you bring anything from the other two plays to this play?

Rachel O'Riordan:

Not in terms of the production, but it gave me, I suppose, a bigger understanding of the world of Leenane in which all three of the plays are set. So it was really helpful for my own brain, just getting into the smallness of that world and how a grudge can be held for years over the tiniest things. When people know each other's business too much, and they all know each other and they all know if somebody did something to me 15 years ago and "He said that about me," and these things are never forgotten because the community is so small that... And you hear characters... There's a tiny mention in Beauty Queen of Coleman Connor and Valene, and Coleman cuts off Valene's dog's ears. But that happens in one of the other plays. Those characters appear in another play in the trilogy. So it doesn't make, in a way, any difference to the audience experience, but it's quite nice to understand the world more.

Kate Bassett:

Yeah. It's a bit like the... I was going to say The Wexford Trilogy. Where you go, "Oh, it's a world that is, not really, but the theatrical equivalent of a soap." You know who else lives-

Rachel O'Riordan:

Yeah, totally that.

Kate Bassett:

... down the street. Yeah.

Rachel O'Riordan:

Totally that.

Kate Bassett:

Yeah. Gentlemen in the front?

Speaker 4:

In the 1960s I used to holiday in Connemara. The atmosphere, does it come across in this play? The atmosphere of that area?

Rachel O'Riordan:

I hope so. We've really tried to. That's the magic of theatre, isn't it? We all know that we're sitting in Chichester. We all know that we're in Sussex and if we do our job right, you forget that. And you feel that you're somewhere else for the period of time of the play.

Kate Bassett:

It's just a particularly wonderful thing after lockdown, actually, isn't it?

Rachel O'Riordan:

Yes.

Kate Bassett:

You travel. You travel without travelling. Yeah.

Rachel O'Riordan:

I hope so, actually. I really hope so.

Kate Bassett:

Yeah. There's a question.

Speaker 5:

Has anything surprised you about audience reactions so far?

Rachel O'Riordan:

Yeah. Every audience reaction's been really different. On the first couple of shows, I wondered if the audience could understand the actors' accents because it's like anything: You have to tune in to an accent that you're not used to hearing. So I thought the audience was quite quiet in the first couple of shows and I was like, "Oh my God do they...?" And they weren't laughing in the first scene. I was like, "Hmm. Is that okay? Should they be?" And I thought "Maybe they can't understand what they're saying."

Rachel O'Riordan:

And then I did actually have a rain sound cue in scene one, which you'll be pleased to hear I cut. Because it was underpinning that first scene. And so that you could hear more clearly. But then sometimes I was like, "I wonder if they're not understanding them." And they were quite quiet, the audience. And then as the play went on, there was this moment where Maureen says something like, "Oh, I'll be happy to have him here if he likes murdering our women." And the whole auditorium just erupted in laughter. So I was like, "Oh, they can..." So it's interesting. My job is all about the

audience, really. So I'm always trying to gauge what's working, what's not working, what are they not getting.

Kate Bassett:

And that's what previews are about. There's such a strange moment, isn't there, when you're watching a dress and, particularly with a comedy, hardly anyone's sitting there and then you have a full audience. And I think that sometimes it depends on if someone starts laughing. It's a kind of permission, isn't it?

Rachel O'Riordan:

That's right.

Kate Bassett:

And so it depends on the audience as well, night by night, because someone might laugh earlier.

Rachel O'Riordan:

Absolutely right. And I think, as well, what's really changed theatre in a way that we mustn't underestimate is masks. The actors can't see your faces anymore. And whilst they wouldn't see your faces in detail, in a theatre like this, you can. You can see. You can see them, they can see you. So this feels quite different for actors. They're getting used to that, not being able to see. Because they can't see if you're smiling.

Kate Bassett:

Yeah. And actually, I was talking to an actor who said that it was really difficult with comedy.

Rachel O'Riordan:

It is difficult. And I think for that first scene, they don't know. They've got blank. They've got no expression coming back from the audience. Because it's a two-way thing, isn't it, live theatre? It's you and them together. I think that is difficult for them. Because you all look like you're not reacting.

Kate Bassett:

But, I hasten to add, good for their health.

Rachel O'Riordan:

Absolutely.

Kate Bassett:

Keep your masks on.

Rachel O'Riordan:

Oh gosh, no, no, no. I'm not for a second saying you shouldn't do it.

Kate Bassett:

I know you're not.

Rachel O'Riordan:

Of course we should do it. But it's just something that's feeling really different, post-pandemic.

Kate Bassett:

Yeah. Yeah. I think we had better wind up because it's just gone quarter past.

Rachel O'Riordan:

Great.

Kate Bassett:

Thank you very much for brilliant questions.

Rachel O'Riordan:

Thank you so much.

Kate Bassett:

Thank you.