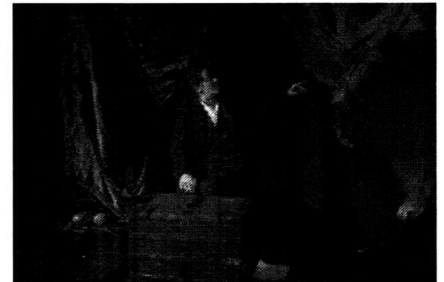


*Are you up for taking a step back in Irish History before the Irish War of Independence?*

## **THEATER REVIEW (NYC): 'THE ARAN ISLANDS' BY J.M. SYNGE, ADAPTED BY JOE O'BYRNE, IRISH REPERTORY THEATRE**

👤 Carole Di Tosti 🕒 July 12, 2017 👁 125 Views

*The Aran Islands* J.M. Synge's work adapted and directed by Joe O'Byrne in an extended run at the Irish Repertory Theatre through 6 August, first and foremost is a tome to the three, stark, wind swept rocky islands that are the sentinels of Galway Bay on the picturesque and green-lovely West Coast of Ireland. For millennia the Aran Islands have had as their mission to mitigate the ferocious and fickle storms, oppressive fogs, and shattering clashes between air, land, and sea.



*Brendan Conroy in J.M. Synge's 'The Aran Islands,' adapted by Joe O'Byrne, Irish Repertory Theatre (Carol Rosegg)*

They provide a powerful breakfront for Galway City, so that it might prosper unhinged by the natural elements. Without the stolid, natural wall of Inishmaan, Inishmore, and Inisheer, all the harshness of the weather and roaring sea would continually have battered Galway and perhaps lessened Irish interest to build an incredible, romantic, tourist friendly city that is currently flourishing and is a favored recommended spot of Irish citizens who suggest to visitors, "You must visit the west country."

W.B. Yeats said the same to J. M. Synge when they met at the Sorbonne, Paris, in 1896. Only with Yeats being Yeats and Synge being Synge, Yeats encouraged the younger writer to visit and spend time on the Aran Islands to get to know the people and their primitive culture and rural, seaward lifestyle. Yeats hoped that Synge's visit would be the catalyst to spur the young man's imagination and experience the profound themes of birth, life and death. How these central dynamisms of life teased and blasted the inhabitants directly, the fascinated Synge captured in his work. The islanders, who lived without the distractions and stimulations of city life, like the Aran Islands themselves, had to confront and withstand, as it were, the batterings of the elements with only the bulwark of their isolated community network and companionship of fellow resisters.

Yeats most probably wanted Synge to also experience the symbolism of raging nature in confrontation with the stalwart, intrepid character of the lonely inhabitants who managed a meager daily existence in an unwelcoming land. There, they had to face the torments of sickness, ill health, and old age at the edge of the world, which appeared to be going backward in man's history when cities were beginning to experience electricity and modernism.

The fact that they were able to carve out a hard scrabble life was a luxury. Indeed, everywhere they went life and death were married in tortuous embrace and the residents, like a tribal people, used their myths and storytelling to fill the dreary nights and chronicle their relationships to each other and the land as life's and death's immutability clamped down upon all that they endeavored.



*Brendan Conroy in J.M. Synge's  
'The Aran Islands,' adapted by  
Joe O'Byrne, Irish Repertory  
Theatre (Carol Rosegg)*

A visceral and memorable portrait of the natural elements, the people's struggle, and the barren, bleak, rock-hard lifestyle and landscape are indelibly portrayed in the cadences and rhythms of Synge's description of the Aran Islands in O'Byrne's incisive adaptation of Synge's work, formerly a book length journal. The sheer poetic call of the undulations of the sea in its ferocity and tameness, the delicious descriptions and sound effects of language so indelibly linked to Synge's later writing have found a marvelous home in this travelog/ adaptation. O'Byrne has reshaped it into a solo performance of an individual, the reaffirmation of Synge himself, who is a neophyte of all things "Aran." As the production develops, this comes to mean all realms that flow easily among the levels of consciousness in stories told about the past in historical time and place, and which do represent the present, and are harbingers of the future.

I can imagine no one but Brendan Conroy to be the sojourner to the Aran Islands, an older Synge whose face brightens as we might imagine Synge's did when he saw the lands in the distance and eventually stepped off on to the pier and then on hardened, rocky ground. Conroy's mastery of the poetic cadences and luscious images and his manipulation of pauses, digressions and silences transform him into the islands' storytellers and ancient, wizened, rural magi (wise ones), who stories convey ever-present themes. Conroy beautifully renders the particularity of each with effortless realism.

I could understand and visualize every beat, every declension, every word spoken and inferred in the descriptions and characterizations of the islanders, who shared eerie stories around the central core of every family, the hearth. Conroy's insight and understanding of how aural power may transform the listener into his or her own visualist and imagist is greatly appreciated in a time when we too often rely on visual effects selected by others to relate stories which we then can easily dismiss because we have not used our own imagination to power up the visuals.

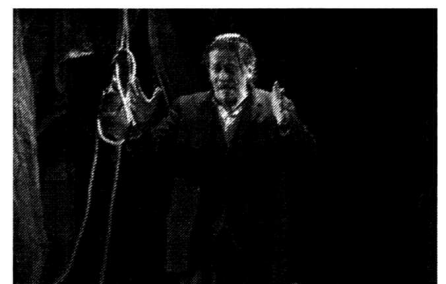


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On another level this is a production about visualizing with the eye of consciousness, of employing one's imagination to be transported through the rich medium of Synge's figurative, elegant, word crafting. If one listens, then one cannot help but focus on Conroy's dark, full-bodied, resonant, somber and sometimes higher pitched musical instrument of a voice which he modulates with just enough breath and lung power to reverberate and touch the hearts of the audience.



*Brendan Conroy in J.M. Synge's  
'The Aran Islands,' adapted by  
Joe O'Byrne, Irish Repertory  
Theatre (Carol Rosegg)*

Conroy entices all, to see encapsulated in the words, the airy visions which are transformed through the medium of sound. With focused attention and appreciation, Conroy provides us with a heightened awareness of Synge's rich language, the sound effects (i.e. alliteration, onomatopoeia), and imagery. Conroy's gestures and changes in posture convey the various island characters; he effects these characterizations with a minimalism that does not detract from the beauty of Synge's words. We are rapt and caught up in the consciousness of Synge's personal observations made real to us. It is of a time and place which is now gone but will be ever-present in the writer's journal and O'Byrne's adaptation.

If you enjoy Synge and love traveling to Ireland, even if at this point you have no intention of going, allow the Irish Repertory Theatre's production of the Aran Islands to take you there. This adaption ably directed by O'Byrne, with the assistance of artistic team Margaret Nolan (set designer), Marie Tierney (costume design), Joe O'Byrne (lighting design), Kieran Duddy (original music) is incisively brought to life. Special kudos goes to Conroy's performance effected by his prodigious talent and artistry. This presentation will bring the sentinels of Galway Bay to your imagination and deliver you to a time and place more viscerally felt than looking at historic sepia photographs.

*The Aran Islands* is currently at the Irish Repertory Theatre (132 West 22nd Street) until 6 August. It is around 100 minutes with one intermission. For tickets visit the Box Office in person or go to their website: [CLICK HERE](#). You can order by phone at 212-727-2737

## COMMENTARY

**First Person: Brendan Conroy on Taking a Solo Leap in Synge's *The Aran Islands***

Through research and collaboration with director Joe O'Byrne, Conroy finds the living breath in Synge's prose.

Brendan Conroy | Off-Broadway | July 12, 2017



Brendan Conroy stars in the stage adaptation of John Millington Synge's *The Aran Islands*.  
(© Carol Rosegg)

I had always been curious about John Millington Synge, the man behind the turbulent and savage comedies *The Playboy of the Western World*, *The Well of the Saints*, and *In the Shadow of the Glen*. My curiosity rose from the fact that I could not find the author in his plays or else he was so well hidden he was invisible, which is a rare quality for the observer not to intrude into the observation. This gives Synge's characters a life that is grounded in their environment, be it walking the roads or running a shebeen on the north coast of county Mayo, his characters derive from a knowledge he gained from living, walking and talking amongst them. The vibrancy and wildness of their lives was in great contrast to his own upbringing as landed class, where he spent many summers in Castle Kevin county Wicklow. His family were deeply religious protestants and he himself rebelled against his background from an early age. How did a man, coming from such a contrasting cultural background come to write some of the greatest plays in Irish drama?

Some of the answers are contained in his early journals written when he first visited the Aran Islands on the advice of Yeats who told him 'Go and give a voice to these people!' Will we ever know how that conversation took place or the nuances of such an exchange? It was there in 1899, and over three subsequent trips, that he found the seeds of his plays *The Playboy*, *Riders to the Sea*, and *In the Shadow of the Glen*. The Aran Islands were where Synge discovered a culture in which words, sentences, and stories were creative actions that imaginatively enhance and enrich the lives of the islanders, a people who lived mostly forgotten in these worlds of mist. He fell under the spell of the wilderness around them as well. In his journals Synge captures man isolated in a universe warring upon them with winds and seas. This ironically mirrors his own personal journey as he struggled with Hodgkin's disease, which placed him also under a sentence of death from a young age. Yet, within this world there is life and laughter, love and joy, and devilment.

So myself and Joe O'Byrne set out on this voyage to explore Synge's early experiences of Aran and we found a treasure trove of characters, storytellers, and the drama of evictions, which are strangely relevant again in today's Ireland, along with the extraordinary ritual of keening that accompanied the final journey of loved ones to the grave.

The process involved following a template set out in Joe's adaptation and infusing it and Synge's prose with some kind of living breath. These words were written to be read, the shape of the sentences were sometimes formal. This kind of language was really challenging to sustain in a performance piece. It had to be informed with emotions and rhythms as if these words were the tip of a wave rushing towards the shore. To arrive at that point was a learning process that extended well into the rehearsal period. It was not a case of imposing any concept on the script, but rather being open to receiving it and rolling with it until I could swim in it or ride it like a currach rides the waves that crash around the rocks of Inismaan.

I had never done a one-man show before and, when going on for the first preview, I realized that I was leaping into thin air. Once I realized that fear was useless, a strange sense of calm landed somewhere around me — and it would only be two hours later that I would know where I landed. It is the same leap every night...it doesn't get any easier! Does Synge elude us again? If we evoke his presence among the rocks and rains of Aran through his own words, then maybe that would be as much as he would have desired.

## Off Broadway Reviews

### *The Aran Islands*

Theatre Review by [David Hurst](#) - June 19, 2017

Long before playwright Martin McDonagh put the spotlight on the Aran Islands in a trilogy of plays: *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1996), *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001), and *The Banshees of Inisherin* (unpublished and unproduced), the islands held a fascination for another Irish playwright, Edmund John Millington Synge (1871-1909). At the urging of his friend and mentor W.B. Yeats, Synge spent five formative summers on the islands (1898-1902) observing their inhabitants and listening to their stories. His journals of that immersive experience would be compiled into a book published to great acclaim in 1907. That book, *The Aran Islands*, has been adapted into a play courtesy of director Joe O'Byrne and actor Brendan Conroy which is now receiving its American premiere at The Irish Repertory Theatre following productions in Dublin in 2015 and a tour of Ireland in 2016.



Brendan Conroy

Photo by Carol Rosegg

The remarkable thing about Synge, who many consider Ireland's greatest playwright, is his literary reputation rests almost entirely on six plays written and produced during the last six years of his life. Untreatable at the time, Hodgkin's disease took Synge's life a few weeks before his 38th birthday at which time his theatrical oeuvre consisted of: two one-acts, *In the Shadow of the Glen* (1903), and *Riders to the Sea* (1904); *The Well of the Saints* (1905); *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), considered his masterpiece; *The Tinker's Wedding* (1908) and *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (1909), unfinished at his death. Is it any wonder then *The Aran Islands* has become source material for a seventh play? Despite its very dim lighting and a faint but persistent bleeding through of sound from their mainstage above (in this case, a Woody Guthrie revue), it's a pleasure to report Conroy, a chameleon like actor, is a mostly riveting presence in the W. Scott McLucas Studio Theatre, the Irish Rep's black box space. Conroy slides in and out of the voices and physical characterizations of the storytellers and their subjects with understated style and presence.



understated style and panache.

In the first act Synge arrives on the islands, gains the trust of the natives and gets down to the work of listening to their stories. It is a stark contrast to the world of privilege Synge has known from his winters in Paris. The second act focuses on Synge's observations on the island's inhabitants and their life events. Many of these experiences, be it the grieving at a funeral or the coming together of a community to display their loyalty to an individual, would find their way into Synge's plays and are easily recognizable to audiences familiar with those works. Conroy, whose subtle performance feels perfectly pitched to the intimate environs

of the space, is aided by the shabby set design of Margaret Nolan and an equally shabby costume courtesy of Marie Tierney. Cleverly, Tierney and Conroy have pulled up the sleeves of his tatty jacket to the elbows so his shirtsleeves gather and bunch around his wrists. When Conroy gnarls up his hands and fingers those shirtsleeves become a prop for him to manipulate and maneuver.

To be sure, a criticism of O'Byrne's adaptation of *The Aran Islands*, a unique hybrid of memoir and commentary, to a stage monologue would be that it gives the same weight to Synge and the storytellers as it does to their folktales. The former simply aren't as interesting as the latter and even a raconteur as talented as Conroy can't spin that much straw into gold. It's easy to see why directors and actors would be eager to unearth more of Synge's writing but O'Byrne's adaptation of *The Aran Islands* only really takes flight when Conroy is giving voice to its humorous and haunting tales.

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### **The Aran Islands**

*Through July 23*

Irish Repertory Theatre, 132 West 22nd Street

Tickets online and current Performance Schedule: [OvationTix](#)

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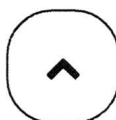
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By William Wolf

## THE ARAN ISLANDS [Send This Review to a Friend](#)

Irish actor Brendan Conroy has the ability to hold an audience spellbound as he interprets J.M. Synge's play "The Aran Islands" in his one-man show adapted and directed by Joe O'Byrne at the Irish Repertory Theatre. He creates an atmosphere that elicits the color in Synge's writing as he describes the geographical area and spins the stories that Synge discovered.

The time is around 1900, and Conroy early on describes approaching the islands off the west coast of Galway, Ireland. There is a forbidding rocky, desolate look at first, and Conroy colorfully captures the initial feelings.

But as the two-act show progresses, the actor plunges deeper and deeper into island existence as conveyed by the author. There are a host of individual stories recollected. Some are droll, some are sad.

One islander, for example, observes that any man who doesn't get married is an old jackass.

Through it all, Conroy modulates his voice to express reactions, and he also strides or strolls about the stage under O'Byrne's direction to provide much-needed movement to keep the performance from becoming static.

It is mainly the actor's gift for mellifluously immersing himself in Synge's portrait of the islands and their people that commands attention and does justice to the play.

At the end of the first act a woman sitting next to me leaned over and said, "I grew up just across from there," indicating that the play had special meaning for her. I have never visited the islands, but I came away with an intimate picture of what life would have been like in that period of history. At the Irish Repertory Theatre, 132 West 22nd Street. Reviewed June 21, 2017.



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## Off-Broadway Review: "The Aran Islands" at Irish Repertory Theatre's W. Scott McLucas Studio Theatre

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Off-Broadway Review: "The Aran Islands" at Irish Repertory Theatre's W. Scott McLucas Studio Theatre (Closed Sunday July 23, 2017)

By John Millington Synge  
Adapted and Directed by Joe O'Byrne  
Reviewed by David Roberts  
Theatre Reviews Limited

At the suggestion of W. B. Yeats, John Millington Synge visited the The Aran Islands (Inishmore, Inisheer, and Inishmaan) during a part of each year from 1898 until 1902. Yeats urged Synge to live there as if he was one of the people themselves and "express a life that has never found expression." His journals from these visits – "The Aran Islands" – were published in 1907. Director Joe O'Byrne has adapted this body of work for the stage. Currently running at Irish Repertory Theatre's W. Scott McLucas Studio Theatre, this adaptation stars the master storyteller Brendan Conroy and provides one-hundred minutes of scintillating – often brilliantly bizarre – tales Synge shared during the time he enmeshed himself into the people and culture of these unique Irish islands off the coast of Galway.

Under Mr. O'Byrne's thoughtful direction, Brendan Conroy emerges from the shadows of Margaret Nolan's spare but serviceable set and "disembarks" on the Aran Islands and instantly embodies the spirit of John Millington Synge. With irrepressible energy and indomitable enthusiasm, Mr. Conroy takes the audience on Synge's island adventures delivering each story, canvassing every rock and every resident with exacting care. Synge's imagery tumbles off Conroy's tongue as he describes his hosts, his blind guide, the storyteller he meets (Pat Dirane), and the countryside he reveres.


Pat's stories and the anecdotes of the old man in Inishmaan take center stage here and Brendan Conroy delivers them with such precision and energy one might think he is speaking Gaelic. He can transport the audience into the matrix of the stories with authenticity and believability. Words glide into the audience with a gracefulness and passion that is engaging and easily connects to the real world of each audience member. One identifies with the characters in the story of the two farmers in County Clare. The old man from Inishmaan **Translate »**

anecdotes of "things that happened in his lifetime" including the story of the Connaught man who killed his father and was protected from the police by the residents of the island. The logic for protecting the criminal: "If a man has killed his father, and is already sick and broken with remorse, they can see no reason why he should be dragged away and killed by the law."


The solo show ends with the story of meeting Pat before leaving the island. "'I'll not see you again,' he said, with tears trickling on his face, 'and you're a kindly man. When you come back next year I won't be in it. I won't live beyond the winter.' And so it would be, when I came back the following year he had indeed passed away. 'But listen now to what I'm telling you; let you put insurance on me in the city of Dublin, and it's five hundred pounds you'll get on my burial.'"

Pat's wit and wisdom thread through "The Aran Islands" and Mr. Conroy's retelling of Synge's account of his time on the Islands gives palpable truth to every word of wisdom and wit teeming from the "lonely rocks" Synge ultimately visited for the last time.

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"The Aran Islands" stars Brendan Conroy. The creative team includes Margaret Nolan (set design), Marie Tierney (costume design), Joe O'Byrne (lighting design), and Kieran Duddy (original music). Michael Palmer serves as production stage manager. Production photos by Carol Rosegg.

Performances of "The Aran Islands" run through Sunday July 23 at Irish Rep Theatre (132 West 22nd Street) in the W. Scott McLucas Studio Theatre on the following schedule: Wednesday at 3:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m., Thursday at 7:00 p.m., Friday at 8:00 p.m., Saturday at 3:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m., and Sunday at 3:00 p.m. General admission tickets are \$50.00 and can be purchased by visiting <https://irishrep.org/> or by calling 212-727-2737. Running time is 100 minutes with one intermission.

Photo: Brendan Conroy in "The Aran Islands." Credit: Carol Rosegg.

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