

# Dramatic times on stage

UCD's DramSoc was the starting place for many well-known actors, writes Peter McGuire

The dramatic and imposing structure of Earlsfort Terrace once hosted a vibrant student drama society. Here, faces which would later become household names gathered around the DramSoc notice board, eagerly awaiting news of the latest plays and castings.

Nearby, in Newman House, at 86 St Stephen's Green, students staged shows in a small theatre space.

Des Keogh, well known in Ireland for his theatre work, was heavily involved in DramSoc during the mid-1950s. "As soon as I got to UCD, I headed straight for the drama society," Keogh recalls. He won a part in a WB Yeats play, *Words Upon the Window Pane*. This play was directed by a young man named Brian Farrell, who went on to become the well-known broadcaster with RTÉ.

DramSoc has a long, distinguished history. In 1927, with the involvement of UCD's literary and historical (L&H) debating society, students began staging original and known works. The early days of DramSoc in Earlsfort Terrace produced such actors as Roger McHugh and Cyril Cusack.

During Keogh's time there, he met Lelia Doolin, who later went on to work as artistic director of the Abbey Theatre and as a producer in RTÉ; Frank Kelly, who became a successful stage and television actor, famously portraying drunken priest Fr Jack in the sitcom *Father Ted*; Ann O'Dwyer, who worked as a presenter with RTÉ; and Kate Binchy, who became a successful television actress.

Perhaps the most significant friendship

Keogh made at DramSoc, however, was with Rosaleen McMeniman and Fergus Linehan (Rosaleen and Fergus later married). Linehan began writing material for revues, which consisted of songs, sketches, monologues and satires, often poking fun at prominent people and political figures of the day.

The shows, which had their humble beginnings in DramSoc, were to become so popular that they began a nationwide tour in 1975 which is still running today.

"Rosie and I started touring the country with the show in 1975, and it made a huge difference to our careers. It's probably what we're best known for, but we don't often like to admit it, because we like to be regarded as actors too," Keogh jokes.

He is currently touring the country with Rosaleen, performing his popular revue show, *Des and Rosie at Large*. He also recently starred in a one man show, *The Love Hungry Farmer*, which he adapted from a show by John B Keane.

At DramSoc, Keogh took on different roles with relish. He played Lorenzo in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, starring

alongside Ronan Keane (later chief justice) who played Shylock. At the Irish University Drama Festival, he played the role of a knight in TS Elliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, while one of his favourite productions was Irish author Oliver Goldsmith's classic play, *She Stoops to Conquer*.

Much of Keogh's time at the Terrace was spent between the DramSoc notice board and Hartigan's pub on Leeson Street.

"We used to spend a lot of time lounging around there and observe everyone passing by," he says.

"The noticeboard was a great meeting place in between lectures. It was beside the main hall, which was always jammed full of life and activity. I suppose you could say I wasted a lot of time in DramSoc, to the detriment of my studies . . . but I don't regret a second of it."

UCD's DramSoc continues to grow strong, celebrating its 80th anniversary last month with a number of plays, performances, workshops and talks, as well as an alumni night, which brought together many of the past and present members of the society. It continues to produce famous names in theatre and film, including Brenda Fricker, Dermot Morgan, Neil Jordan, Jim Sheridan, Conor McPherson, Chris O'Dowd and Gabriel Byrne.

DramSoc moved to the Belfield campus in 1972 and was given rehearsal and performance space in the lower floor of the arts building, where it remains to this day.

Students can still be found lingering around the DramSoc notice-board, rehearsing their lines and investing huge amounts of time and energy into productions which they hope will rival the professionals.

"DramSoc certainly had a huge influence on my life," says Keogh. "It's where I really learned about acting and the theatre. It gave me a huge amount of opportunities and a lot of breaks in the world of drama."

"Most of all, it's where I learnt that acting is really what I love and want to work in."



Actor Des Keogh