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Irish Rep Theatre Gets Lifetime Achievement Award

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Irish Rep Theatre founders Ciaran O'Reilly and Charlotte Moore accept the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Irish American Writers and Artists, presented by actor Gabriel Byrne. Photo: Alexa van Sickle

Actor Gabriel Byrne is late. His driver, or "ex-driver now, most likely," as one of the gathered photographers remarked, did not pick him up, so he is on his way over in a cab.

His destination was Rosie O'Grady's restaurant off Times Square. In the restaurant's upstairs event room, on October 17, Byrne presented the [Irish-American Writers and Artists \(IAWA\) \(http://www.irish-am-wa.org/\)](http://www.irish-am-wa.org/) Lifetime Achievement Award to Ciaran O'Reilly and Charlotte Moore, the founders of New York's [Irish Repertory Theatre \(http://www.irishrep.org/\)](http://www.irishrep.org/). Byrne, born in Dublin in 1950 and producer of the Academy Award-nominated "In The Name of the Father," is Ireland's Cultural Ambassador.

Over 200 guests attended, enjoying the free bar and lamb chop and sausage roll canapés while they awaited Byrne's arrival. The IAWA was founded in 2008 by a group of friends, and it is run by volunteers to celebrate Irish-American contributions to the arts.

"It's not so much an organization, more of a disorganization," said writer Malachy McCourt, one of the IAWA's directors and younger brother of the late writer Frank McCourt. He has been involved since IAWA was formed and organizes a monthly salon where members read and perform. "There is very little specifically Irish-American literature – it's quite a new field," he said. "For a long time the Irish kept a low profile in the arts because things like boxing and showbiz were not considered respectable." McCourt was born in Brooklyn and returned to Limerick, Ireland with his family at the

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age of three. He returned to America when he was 20 and eventually became an actor and writer. Today, he calls himself a New Yorker.

The IAWA started the Eugene O'Neill Lifetime Achievement Award in 2009, given annually to an artist who has created a body of work that places him or her among the greatest artists or entertainers of all time. O'Reilly and Moore started the Irish Repertory Theatre in September 1988, with the mission of bringing works by Irish and Irish American writers and playwrights to American audiences. Its current home is 132 West 22nd Street, but it began in O'Reilly's basement, with the boiler room as the stage and the laundry room as the dressing area.

"My head is spinning," said O'Reilly after the ceremony. Amiable and energetic, the theater's producing director appears younger than his 52 years. "One of the presenters, I believe it was Byrne, said they can't imagine a New York without the Irish Repertory Theater and that's about as nice as you can possibly get. I'm so moved by the community and the support we have."

The informal cocktail reception featured speeches by IAWA president Peter A Quinn, McCourt and Byrne, who appeared in Eugene O'Neill's "A Touch of the Poet" with O'Reilly in 2005. Byrne called the theater "an incredible achievement – bringing the work of so many Irish playwrights to New York, and creating a window into who we are as a people." The speeches drew many laughs, especially when Quinn remarked that Lindsay Lohan had been a close second choice to receive the award. All referenced the outstanding contribution of the Irish experience both to literature and the stage — as McCourt put it: "The Irish are storytellers that conquered the language the conquerers required of us."

"IAWA members are Irish nationals, second, and third generation Irish, and lots of others, for example Irish-Cubans," said John Lee, an IAWA volunteer who helped coordinate the event. "There is a strong writing element but we also have singers, artists, videographers and people involved in the theatre."

The gathered crowd was diverse in age, appearance and profession; their common thread is their connection to Ireland or the Irish experience. Roisin Fitzpatrick is a Dublin-based artist who creates her light-and-crystal pieces in Ireland but presents it in New York, and who spoke at the last IAWA salon. She was inspired to create a series of contemporary artworks after a life-changing incident: "I had a near-death experience a few years ago, and started creating art after that. I show it in New York because they city has such a rich art and cultural scene."

Mary Carroll is a teacher and Associate Dean of CUNY's Institute for Irish-American Studies, and Irish on her father's side. "I came here tonight because I wanted to get more involved on a personal level. My children are Irish citizens through their grandparents."

"I am a supporter. I am always amazed by the wit and humor of these events, and the laughter, said Patricia Falvey, a doctor from Dallas. Bob Wood, a psychoanalyst, said, "the comments were suitably brutal."

Byrne stayed on to chat to well-wishers and pose for endless photographs. "As Ireland's cultural ambassador, he is involved in all sorts of Irish culture, everywhere and all the time," said McCourt.

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