



L.A. CONFIDENTIAL

By Dan Berkowitz

from *The Dramatist: The Journal of The Dramatists Guild of America*

January/February 2007

Kelly Younger is Irish.

Well, not literally. He was born and raised in Los Angeles (“It’s uncommon – I’m one of the few”), and is proud to proclaim himself a “huge defender” of the city, calling it and its theatrical scene “one of the most dynamic and diverse” anywhere.

But he’s Irish. And no, not because of the name, nor the heritage, nor the almost-red hair and fair complexion. Nor because Samuel Beckett is his favorite playwright. Nor because he’s tortured in any of the maudlin ways the characters of Synge or O’Neill can be tortured.

True, in his earlier years, he did go through a fair amount of twists and turns and soul-searching.

Attending Loyola Marymount University on a singing scholarship (he’s an Irish tenor), Younger’s initial life plan was to be a lawyer. But then he chose ancient Greek as “the one class to take for fun” – and fell in love with it. He wound up being the only student to major in Greek, which meant most of his seminars consisted solely of the professor and him. “I would be absolutely screwed when I hadn’t done the work.”

Somewhere along the line, he dropped the plan to be a lawyer, and thought of becoming a writer. But what kind? He remembers thinking: “I’ll be a poet.” Followed not too long after by the thought: “But my poetry is really bad.” He briefly considered writing novels,

but realized “the only thing good about my fiction was the dialogue.”

A professor suggested that, since his dialogue *was* good, perhaps he should try his hand at writing a play. Which he did. *Pull for Exit*, a one-act set inside a womb, with soon-to-be-born triplets battling for their mother’s attention while struggling for more personal space, won a playwriting contest and was performed on campus.

So did this mean he would be a playwright then? “Truth be told, I really didn’t know what I wanted to do,” he sighs. So he “applied for a variety of things,” and wound up accepting a full-ride scholarship to work toward a master’s in Greek at Loyola University of Chicago, his first time living outside Los Angeles.

“I spent two years studying the classics – and freezing!” he says, which invariably led to thoughts of a career in archeology. “But you have to be outside in the sun if you’re an archeologist, and, being Irish, I knew I’d be burnt to a crisp.” Another career down the tubes.

But something was beginning to gel. “I kept coming back to Greek drama,” he says. And when it was time to pursue a Ph.D., and he was

debating between classics and literature, the scales were tipped when he won a scholarship for a year to study for a second master’s degree. In drama. In Ireland.

So he moved to the Auld Sod, where he eventually spent three years attending University College Dublin, earning the master’s, and doing the preparatory work toward his Ph.D. He moved back to Los Angeles to write his dissertation on Irish versions of Greek tragedies, which was later published as a book.

Before he returned to the States, though, the die had actually been cast in Dublin with two separate but pivotal events. The graduate program at the University was looking for a play to produce, and chose *Most Monday Mornings*, Younger’s translation of a little-produced play of Sophocles called *The Women of Trachis*. In addition to translating the play, Younger had updated it, and set it in Ireland. “I wanted to show that Greek tragedy is still present-tense.”

And, on his way to the grocery store to buy Guinness one day, Younger picked up a flyer announcing a playwriting contest on the life of Lady Gregory, co-founder with W. B. Yeats of the Abbey Theatre. The deadline was only a week away, but in one of

those moments which conjures up the phrase “the luck of the Irish,” at the store he came upon a box of chocolates in which the pieces were named after famous Irish women. You can guess who was one of them.

“I thought it was an omen that I’d encountered Lady Gregory twice in a matter of minutes,” he says, so he went home, did some quick research, wrote a one-act play “in two hours,” and sent it off.

“I didn’t hear anything for eight months,” by which time he’d come home to L.A. to work on his thesis. “Then came a phone call at 3:00 AM to tell me I’d won,” he laughs. *Lady Gregory’s Ingredients* had been selected by a panel including Tony-winning director Garry Hines, and Younger was flown back to Ireland for the premiere.

So was he a playwright now? “I decided to pursue playwriting, because I really enjoyed it,” he admits. But to earn a living, he made use of his academic degrees by becoming a “freeway flyer” – the term for young academics who haven’t yet gotten their Ph.D.s, and make ends meet by teaching part-time at colleges around the L.A. area. “I spent a lot of time grading papers on the freeway!”

After finishing the dissertation, he applied for a full-time position at Loyola Marymount, where he’s now taught for six years. He was recently granted tenure as an associate professor of English, “which means I’m here for the rest of my life,” he says with a laugh.

At LMU, Younger teaches dramatic literature, and leads workshops in playwriting, both for undergraduates and graduate students. But, unlike many academic workshops where the emphasis is all about the writing, Younger takes a different tack.

“We do more reading than writing,” he maintains. “You learn an awful lot about playwriting by reading plays, and often you learn more from reading bad plays than good ones. So I assign quite a few plays for the students to read.”

He goes on: “I know a lot of students today want to be writers, but many of them are only interested in their own writing. So we read first, and we don’t start writing till the fifth week of the workshop.”

In the remaining ten weeks of each semester, undergraduates are expected to complete a 10-minute play and a one-act, while graduate students must produce a full-length. “We read and talk about”

each student's work in the classroom, but Younger also insists that everyone read the work again twenty-four hours later, "and email the author with additional comments."

The goal of the workshop, though, is not simply to come up with a piece of writing. For the "final exam," each student must research Los Angeles theatres to find an appropriate venue for his or her play, then put together a query packet to that theatre. "They have to include a cover letter, a synopsis, a character breakdown, a brief bio, a self-addressed stamped postcard for reply, and a stamped envelope addressed to the proper person at the theatre. After I review all the material, I sent the packets off to the theatre companies myself," says Younger.

"I don't want to do a class where you just play around," he insists. "I want the students to submit to the real world – to get them in the habit of doing something. How do you act as your own agent and publicist? How do you contact a theatre company and get them to read your work? You've got to feed the pipeline. You can't sit around and wait to be discovered."

Which might be Younger's mantra for himself as well. "Anytime I see a call for submission, a contest

entry, a flyer – I'm there!" he laughs, adding seriously: "I owe most of my success to that follow-through."

And this willingness to submit also brought Younger one of his more unusual successes. "When the *New Yorker* started its cartoon caption contest, I decided I was going to submit a caption every week. The deadline was midnight on Sunday. My wife and I had just had our son [Aidan Beckett]. I was doing diapers and schoolwork, but I figured if I could write one sentence a week, it would keep me going. Well, one week I won, and the cartoon is framed in my office."

So, in the end, how is Kelly Younger truly Irish? Well, he refers to playwriting as a "magnificent neurosis." Now, I'm askin' ya, who else but an Irishman would put it that way? Kelly's website is www.kellyyounger.com