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I was born in Limerick in the mid seventies and spent most of life living there until I moved to the UK in 2006 to complete doctoral studies at the University of Exeter. When I moved there first I found myself comparing Exeter to Limerick, looking for similarities, differences and so on. One thing I noticed immediately was that Exeter embraces its river. The historic Exeter quayside is described in tourism brochures as one of the most attractive areas of the city, and is popular with both locals and visitors alike. It has a fascinating history, interesting architecture and lively pubs and restaurants. Throughout the year there are lots of different events held on and around the quayside, everything from 10k runs to live music. You can browse in antique shops, walk, cycle, take a relaxing boat trip or find something good to eat. When people from Limerick came to visit it was the first place I took them to.

I have spent quite a bit of time on rivers in recent years. I lived very near the River Exe and for some parts of the year actually on it and was surprised by how much people used the river, particularly for leisure. Every time I came home and I walked by the river Shannon I was saddened by the fact that Limerick never seemed to quite embrace its own historic quayside. Despite being a significant part of the landscape of the city, the city has often come under criticism for turning its back on it. I knew it had a history, particularly as a vibrant working port as my father grew up near the docks, and he often regaled us with childhood tales of mischief and devilment that he and his friends got up to. I felt sad that Limerick seemed not to embrace its river the way other cities do.

All that was to change though in 2012 when I was approached to take part in the inaugural Elemental Arts and Culture Festival and I set out to create a piece of theatre about the river Shannon and its relationship to the people of Limerick. I have been involved in the arts, mainly theatre, for over twenty years and in the last ten years I have specialised in a particular form of theatre called Theatre of Testimony. This is where I interview people about a subject or topic of interest to them and then create a play using their words. The first people that I interviewed were a group of men from St Mary's Maritime Project and it was immediately obvious that there was a whole side to the river I knew nothing about. They told stories of how people made their living from the river and where there had once been a thriving fishing community on both the lower and the upper Shannon, this way of life had been steadily declining over the years. A variety of emotions flooded through me, from excitement to embarrassment, from curiosity to admiration. These men showed me a glimpse of their world and I longed to know more.

At the same time, I received an oral recording by email from a woman called Mary Farren living in New York. She had heard about the project through her cousin, Mary O'Shea who lives in Limerick. Mary recalled how her father, who had left Limerick when he was sixteen, had a great *grá* for the city and also had instilled a deep love of the river Shannon in his children. I got the opportunity to meet Mary Farren earlier this year and it just so happened it was on the weekend of her Dad's anniversary; he had passed seven years previous. On the Sunday evening she had a family BBQ and they shared stories about her Dad and the

various trips they had made to Limerick over the years. When I left the following evening, Mary thanked me for bringing Limerick into their home on such a day.

In August this year, with the support of funding from Limerick City of Culture, I performed thirty-seven performances of my one-woman testimony play *The River*, on board an 80ft Dutch Barge at Custom House Quay. The play was the culmination of nearly two years of research and story gathering about the river and its presence in Limerick. Audiences responded readily to the piece and said it reminded them of the positive side of Limerick and made them look at the city with new eyes. As part of the run, we were also fortunate to be able to stream a performance live to Coogan's Bar in New York so that Mary and her family could watch the play in action.

Working on the play has changed my relationship to the city and the river. It has brought me onto the river, into the river and along its banks. I have heard stories about growing up, finding love, death, emigration, fishing, friendship, battles, boat building, and sailing to name but a few. One thing that I have learned through the course of this project is that the river is very much alive in the city. The river is its own force and people engage with it how they will. People also want to see it used more. Many have reminisced about its past often lamenting Limerick's decline as a vibrant and important trading port and this is something we should capitalise on. I have also realised that I don't know nearly as much about the history of the river and its relationship to the city as I should. This has inspired me to delve deep into its waters and unearth even more stories and memories. But the real discovery has been the connection people both here in Limerick and abroad, have to the river. Limerick is a world class city with a world class river with far more stories out there than will ever be told. It is up to us the people of Limerick to find them and let them breathe.



Photo: Helena Enright on the River Shannon taken by John Garrett