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As this catalogue goes to print I am about to begin rehearsals for my new one woman show *The River*. The play is the culmination of nearly two years of research and story gathering about the river and its presence in Limerick. But far from feeling like the end of something I see it as more like the beginning.

I've been thinking for a while now about when I first became aware of the River Shannon. At what age did I acknowledge its presence in my life, did I know of its existence? My first encounter with the river would have been in my mother's womb, as I was born in the regional maternity on the Ennis Road. We lived at the other side of the city, so Mam would have had to cross it to go to the maternity. After my birth I crossed the river to return to what was to become my home. I wonder did my mother acknowledge that upon crossing the river as I was to emerge, that she would cross the bridge as a different person a few days later. How did they cross the river I want to know? I am assuming it was in a car driven by my Dad. But what car, which car? What was their conversation like as they crossed the bridge knowing that very soon their lives would change forever? I realise that I don't know as much about the circumstances of my birth as I think I do. And I wonder is that important and if so why am I considering it now. What conversation did they have when they crossed the river having left the hospital with this new little human being who they were now responsible for? I am trying still to think of my first memories of the river. I can remember the river from later years – primary school – but the earliest or my first memory escapes me at this time. I wonder what other people's earliest memories of the river are...

-extract from my Journal in Sept 2012

The genesis for the play began in August 2012 when I was asked to get involved in the inaugural Elemental Arts and Culture Festival¹. The idea was to hold a festival of arts and culture that would take inspiration from the elements. As a theatre practitioner I have been incorporating the testimony of real people into my writing and performance work for almost a decade. When I was approached to create something for the festival, the element of water came to mind and I thought about the river. Although the River Shannon is a significant part of the landscape of the city of Limerick, the city has often come under criticism for turning its back on it. I wondered what the people of Limerick actually thought about the river, what it meant to them. I had spent quite a bit of time on rivers in recent years. I had been living near the River Exe in the southwest of England and was surprised by how much people used the river particularly for leisure. Apart from rowing I realised that I actually had never seen much activity on the river in Limerick City, particularly within that stretch as it passes from Thomond Bridge to the Shannon Bridge.

As the project commenced I began to think about my own relationship to the river. I had crossed the river for my most of my school years, watched the 'new' bridge being built and heard it whistle while I was in class. How much notice had I really

taken of the river? What were my own stories? The extract below recalls an entry from my notebook around the time I started the process. The words on the image overleaf are also taken from a word association exercise I did around that time. This is my way of getting in touch with the subject matter of any project that I start. It is important for me that I know or

¹ The Festival has now become an annual event in Limerick's calendar and continues to grow and expand every year.

begin to know where it resonates in me. My relationship with the river wasn't that close. I certainly loved it but I didn't really have any connection to it as such. I had never been on the river. My relationship was that of a distant lover, always standing on the shore, always longing to be a part of something but not quite sure. I wanted to know how it featured in other people's lives. What were their stories of the river?

The weekend of the festival came and despite receiving good coverage in the press I was dismayed by the lack of public response. I had let my imagination run away with me and envisaged crowds turning up with their stories and memorabilia about the river. The people who did come couldn't have been more helpful and generous with their stories and time. A group of men came from St Mary's Maritime Project and it was obvious that there was a whole side to the river that I was not aware of. People had made their living from the river. 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 a world I knew nothing about and I longed to know more. I was offered the chance to take a trip on the river on board their boat The Oilean Mhuire which I readily accepted. The following Monday morning as I boarded the boat, I realised that I had never actually been on the river and I wondered how many other people had never been on the river. And so the seed was sown, when I wrote the play, I would stage it on a boat on the river itself.

[include image of boat with the following quote imprinted on it]

It's amazing the amount of people
that live and die in Limerick and
they have never been on the river.

Anthony O'Farrell, Former Crosbie Row Fisherman

This was one of a number of defining moments throughout the project; each one changing the shape and altering the course of the project and taking it in a new direction, much like the journey of the river itself.

For the most part I like to let stories find me. Stories much like a river, take on their own shape as they journey from person to person. They gather momentum from the anecdotes and contributions each new teller makes and they in turn shape and define the new story that emerges to be retold. In the same way the river gathers momentum as it makes its way from its source to the sea, stories gather momentum en route from the mouth to the ear. And just as the river finds its way to the sea, I like to think that if a story wants to be told it will find its way to the right ear.

The first story that found its way to me was in the form of an oral recording which I received by email on 6th September 2012 from a woman called Mary Farren living in New York. She had heard about the project through her cousin, Mary O'Shea who lived in Limerick. When I initially put out the call for stories, I was living in the UK and was conscious that I might not be in a position to collect stories in person. I had been doing some research on digital storytelling and so asked people to record themselves talking about the river and email it to me. This was a new venture for me.

My father was John O'Reilly - he lived in what was known as "The Long Can" or Rixtown Terrace- now I think the street is referred to as Old Clare Street. Although he was only 16 - when he left Limerick- it seemed he lived there so much longer - his feelings and love for the city never diminished. The River Shannon it seemed was the place they could go to and be free of everything else. They were poor and the Shannon was their magnificent playground. I couldn't wait to see it one day -and my cousin Mary really sensed that in me and so we spent a lot of time ourselves walking the banks, talking to people who live in the cottages along the banks. I even took a swim in the river when I was younger... Extract from transcript of Mary Farren's recording. [insert image of me with Mary Farren in New York – text maybe to go on the image]

Although Mary's was to be the only audio recording I received from abroad it took the project in a new direction and for the 2013 Elemental Festival, I created *Shannon's Way*, an interactive audio experience which people could download and listen to as they walked along the banks of the Shannon. But far from just going off course, this detour has resulted in my decision to widen the scope of the project to create a variety of artistic experiences from the stories of the Shannon.

Earlier this year I received an email from a lady from Malaysia about what the River Shannon meant to her and it made me realise there were more stories out there beyond people who had left this country; the river had touched the lives of people who had come to this country whether as a visitor or to stay. [see piece of writing on last page]

In the same way that I like to let stories find me, it seemed that in order to realise my desire to stage the play on a boat, I had to let a boat find me. After spending eight or so months searching the length and breadth of the country it appeared that there wasn't a suitable boat available. Various suggestions were put forth including back up plans to stage the play on land on the banks of the river. I remember at one point standing at the side of the river looking out towards the estuary and willing a suitable boat to sail up its waters. A few days later during a conversation with Jacinta Khan of the George Boutique Hotel in Limerick she revealed that only that morning she was speaking to a woman who was bringing a barge from Donegal to

its new home in Dromineer. It would be sailing up the estuary very shortly and might just be the answer to my prayers. The barge, named Spero in Deo (Trust in God) was built in 1895 and was exactly what I was looking for.

Fate was also to play a part once more in June when I travelled to New York for some research and had the opportunity to meet Mary Farren. Initially I had planned to travel in March but that was not to be. I then planned to go in April but that too also didn't work. I finally made the trip in June and when I arrived at Mary's home she informed me that it was her Dad's anniversary the following day, 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.

The development of the project has not been unlike the development of a river. Since its inception, the project has been through a number of phases and has brought me into contact with people from all walks of life. Starting from a small source - a conversation with my friend and colleague Maeve McGrath - this project has stumbled across books, artefacts, websites and people at each stage gathering momentum from the anecdotes and stories I have collected. It has meandered around bends, changed course and then redirected itself in order to find its way out into the world. Its scope has widened and the net has been cast wide for stories that are adrift.

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.

This project has also put me in touch with my roots. My paternal great grandmother came from Labasheeda right down at the end of the estuary and her grandson - my father - grew up in O'Curry Place not too far from the docks. This has resulted in the sharing of family stories and memories and has created a new space for them to live and breathe in our family. 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 and that there are far more stories out there than will ever be told. But I think that is okay. Stories find us when we need them; whether we need teaching, healing or merely entertaining, stories are everywhere. What's yours?

River Shannon, the matchmaker

Dr Soo Ling Howard

In the 1970s, during those days when the internet was virtually non-existent and the mobile phone unheard of, corresponding with pen-pals was all the craze.

I had a pen-pal with green eyes and dark hair. It was great fun writing and receiving letters from the land of rainbows and leprechauns. Michael Howard would write on proper letter pad (never on aerogramme) and there was an assortment of stamps on every envelope because he knew I collected stamps. Whenever the postman came on his trusty old bicycle, I would get all excited and wondered if there was a letter from County Clare for me. A letter from Ireland to Malaysia would take about 10 days and vice-versa and so on the average, I would get about 2 letters each month from Michael.

It was worth the wait.

We corresponded for seven years and we mailed each other little gifts because bigger presents would mean more postage. I was still in secondary school then. Michael sent me a lock of hair which I still have in my box of keepsakes.

As with long-distance friendship, the correspondence gradually petered out.

Then in 2008, I decided to carry out a google search on Michael. Amazed by the number of possible Michaels in County Clare, I saw one entry that looked promising and wrote a short note to him, assuring him that I was no con-woman, and asked if he could check whether his father ever had a Malaysian pen-pal. It was Michael's son.

So there was an onslaught of letters, emails, online-chats, and phone calls. The excitement between two long lost pen-pals was so intense that I found myself flying to Ireland for the first time in 2008. When we first reunited, it was as if we had known each other all our lives.

One day, as we were sitting on the banks of the river Shannon, I was treated to some old-fashioned vintage declaration with all its charm. Michael told me what he could offer as a husband – his strengths, his humility, his assets, his love. As I watched the ducks waddling on the river bank making webbed imprints in the mud, I knew that Michael had made imprints on my heart.

I left my job as an associate professor at the university, left my friends and family and flew over 6800 miles to be married to a wonderful Irish man. As the River Shannon meanders from the north to the south of Ireland and changes its course, little did I know that River Shannon would change the course of our lives too.

Email received from Soo Ling Howard 20th March 2014

word association

30th March 2013



River	invasion	sound	pride
Water	acceptance	toilet	feeling
Flow	help	sewage	touch
Current	build	ducks	smell
Rapid	views	swans	taste
Bridge	terrace	wildlife	see
crossing	rower	otters	sight
life	boatmen	workers	trees
bank	lonesome	docks	plants
blue	suicide	dockland	colours
grey	death	income	green
brown	tragedy	goods	bed
ripple	people	containers	birds
stone	family	cranes	oars
boat	sorrow	tall	marina
house	grief	buildings	ships
fisherman	bottom	apartments	pubs
fish	rock	path	drinking
salmon	trolley	road	sun
knowledge	net	cars	summer
island	fishing-rod	bikes	winter
cut-off	cold	walking	spring
moat	wet	running	change
castle	trickle	lights	weather
	splash	flowers	affect
		flags	storm
		torrent	wind
			meanders

These words are to be transposed over the image on the next page in the final catalogue.



Image of the River Shannon taken by Helena Enright