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Educating Brigid - Part I

The first time I ever saw actress Brigid Duffy, she was performing in Irish Rep's production of Marina Carr's *The Mai*. That was about ten years ago. The play was good. Brigid was great. Since then, I have gotten to know Brigid a little at a time, first as an actress, then as a tireless supporter of the now-defunct Irish Repertory of Chicago, and now as a friend who has helped me to get our play *The Quiet Man Tales* up and running.

But Brigid is not just a gifted actress. Brigid Duffy Gerace is an educator. Whether it's on a stage, or in a classroom, or just chatting with her, Brigid is out to teach you something. And she apparently can't help herself.

Brigid Duffy was born near the town of Granard, Co. Longford, in the Irish Midlands. Her father, James Duffy, was a farmer. He emigrated to America—to New York in the 1920s—and worked on the Empire State Building as a carpenter. When the Great Depression hit, he returned to Ireland. Brigid's mother, Annette Donoghue, came to America about the same time as James did and worked in Evanston as a maid. When the Depression hit, she too returned to Ireland. James met Annette, they fell in love, and decided to get married. He was a "typical young Irishmen in those days," according to Brigid, "52 years old." Annette was much younger. They had four daughters, which is "disappointing if you are a farmer," says Brigid, their eldest daughter.

Neither James nor Annette was well educated, but they didn't want anyone to ever say that about their daughters. Annette felt that her girls would have better educations and an easier life in America. So back they came, this time to Chicago.

In those days, an alien needed an American citizen to act as a sponsor for that person, someone who had a job waiting for that person. Brigid's Uncle Joe had a business as a painter here in Chicago. He sponsored James and found him work as a carpenter. In just a few months, James was able to buy a house for his family, but Annette never got a chance to enjoy it. She became ill and passed away a year to the date after they came to America. But she saw to it that her daughters had opportunities that she never had.

Brigid was 10 years old when her mother passed away; her youngest sister Kathy was only two. Her dad was in his 60s by then. "Things were rough," she says, "but people were awfully good to us."

Brigid attended St. Andrews Elementary School, run by the Sisters of Providence. She worked in the Convent and when she graduated, the sisters paid her tuition so she could attend Immaculata High School. She went on to Mundelein College, and then the Goodman School of Drama.

So, how did she get into acting? "You'll laugh," she said. "I used to love to go to the movies with my sisters and my friends on Saturdays. And I loved Esther Williams movies. And I thought that's what I want to do. I want to be in movies someday, which of course is insane." She took acting classes in high school and landed the leads in some of the plays. Her drama teacher got her students jobs as ushers at the downtown theatres, so they could see all the big shows and study the greats. Brigid kept learning as she saw the likes of Elaine Strich, Helen Hayes, the Lunts. The Lunts returned the favor a few years later by coming to see a show that Brigid was in—Eugene O'Neill's *Ah Wilderness!* with Richard Kiley and Barbara Bel Geddes.

Brigid had wanted to go straight to the Goodman School of Drama from high school, but her drama teacher thought that "everybody there was a little too freaky or too weird." And so Brigid went to Mundelein College of Loyola University and majored in Theatre. "Four more years with the nuns."

After graduating from Mundelein, Brigid finally got to the Goodman, where she worked with professional actors for the first time. While there, she won the Sarah Siddons Scholarship, which, along with The Friends of Drama, took care of her tuition. After finishing her studies at the Goodman, Brigid was invited to join American Conservatory Theatre (ACT), then in Pittsburgh.

While she was still in school, she also met a young actor named Charles Gerace while she attended a class at Theatre On The Lake. They started dating, "but I didn't tell my father that I was going out with a Sicilian," she says with a laugh.

Brigid and Charles did summer stock together in Hayward, Wisconsin. "It was a very on-a-shoe-string summer stock. The guy had one lightbulb for us to put our makeup on." One set featured a staircase with a banister made out of toilet paper rolls. "So you didn't dare lean on anything." But there was an upside to it, says Brigid. "You learned a lot.

You had to do a show a week. There were only four in the company, so there were a lot of lines for everybody.”

When Charles was drafted during the Vietnam War, and was sent to Berlin in 1967-68, Brigid went overseas with him, and there they were married.

In 1974, Brigid appeared in Friel's *Freedom Of The City* at the Goodman. Friel was on hand during the production, and she got to know him well. There was only one female role, and that went to a star. Brigid was her understudy and the dialect coach. “So he and I were the only ones with very little to do, so we had a great time.”

“He's a devil—an absolute devil—full of mischief. “I was over in the cafeteria (at the old Goodman Theatre in the Art Institute) having a bowl of soup, and he came over to me and he said, ‘I'm so glad I found you – they're searching for you – she broke her leg – you've got to go on.’ I said No! and he said, ‘Hurry up!’” Of course she didn't break her leg. He's not to be trusted. His grandchildren play with my niece's kids. I think he's wonderful.”

For the past 10 years, Brigid has played Mary Todd Lincoln at the Chicago History Museum, teaching children storytelling. She performs. She teaches a class at Northwestern. She does dialect coaching. She has grown children and grandchildren. Full plate you say?

Recently, Brigid and Charles worked together on *Bread and Salt*, poems by Carl Sandburg selected by Charles to depict a day in the life of Sandburg. He leaves on a train from Galesburg and comes to Chicago for the day. The poems reflect Sandburg's response to the architecture, to the people, the injustice, the opportunity, and the fun of it all. Originally presented as an ensemble piece at the Irish American Heritage Center last year, directed by Charles Gerace, *Bread and Salt* will be part of the 2008 Humanities Festival.

Does she have any advice for young actors? With a laugh and a glint, Brigid Duffy says, “Listen! Just listen! And you'll know exactly what to do.”