

# SAN JOSE STAGE COMPANY

...The Bay Area's Award-Winning Off-Broadway Theatre...

## Media Release

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OCTOBER 27, 2009 – FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## SAN JOSE STAGE COMPANY

### Presents



## CONOR McPHERSON'S Intoxicating Holiday Fable **THE SEAFARER** Nov. 18 - Dec. 20, 2009

The men who make their way home for the holidays in *THE SEAFARER* aren't exactly looking forward to sharing a cup of cheer; they're more interested in achieving blind drunkenness, a state

they know well. But a stranger in their midst, in town to collect a major poker debt, forces them to take a look at their lives—and where they'll end up if they're not more careful about how they play the game. Dubbed "the best Irish play since the glory days of Samuel Beckett" by the *Chicago Tribune*, the Tony Award winner is a darkly funny examination of that country's culture of drinking and the arguable states of grace achieved by those who embrace it.

For press passes or to schedule interviews with actors and/or the director, please contact Jill Amone at The Amone Group, at (408) 298-8905. More information is available at [www.thestage.org](http://www.thestage.org).

Previews of THE SEAFARER begin at The Stage, 490 South First Street, downtown San Jose, on Wednesday and Thursday, November 18-19, at 7:30 pm and Friday, November 20, at 8 pm, with a **Gala Opening on Saturday, November 21, at 8 pm**. Performances continue Wednesday and Thursday at 7:30 pm, Friday and Saturday at 8 pm and Sunday at 2 pm through December 20, 2009.

### **CAST, DESIGNERS ARE THE REAL DEAL**

Following their performances in San Jose Stage Company's critically-acclaimed season-opening production of THE PILLOWMAN, **Julian López-Morillas\*** and **Randall King\*** return in THE SEAFARER, playing brothers Richard and Sharky Harkin, respectively. Julian's other shows at The Stage include WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?, BETRAYAL, THE LIVING and SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR. Randall, the Company's Artistic Director, has recently appeared in GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS, THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK, THE WHITE HOUSE MURDER CASE, IDOLS OF THE KING, TRUE WEST and INHERIT THE WIND.

**Kevin Blackton\***, who was last seen at The Stage in THE GREAT AMERICAN TRAILER PARK MUSICAL, plays Mr. Lockhart, the stranger who joins them for cards. Kevin's extensive credits with the Company include appearances in THE WHITE HOUSE MURDER CASE; URINETOWN: THE MUSICAL, INHERIT THE WIND, I HATE HAMLET, A SKULL IN CONNEMARA and OF MICE AND MEN.

**Colin Thomson\***, who was last seen at The Stage in EVERY CHRISTMAS STORY EVER TOLD, plays Ivan Curry, the Harkin brothers' hapless drinking and poker buddy. Colin has appeared with The Stage in GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS, LEND ME A TENOR, CHAPS, THE LIVING and CUMBERLAND BLUES.

Rounding out THE SEAFARER's cast is **Donald G. Emmerich** (Nicky Giblin). Donald is making his San Jose Stage Company debut and has performed regionally in San Francisco, New York and Los Angeles in productions such as THE COMEDY OF ERRORS and TRUE WEST.

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**Kimberly Mohne Hill**, an Assistant Professor of Acting and Voice at Santa Clara University, is directing her first show at San Jose Stage Company, having made her professional acting debut in The Stage's COME BACK TO THE FIVE & DIME, JIMMY DEAN, JIMMY DEAN. Kimberly has been directing, acting, teaching and coaching in the Bay Area for over 15 years. She also works as a dialect coach for San Jose Stage Company and other area theatre groups.

**Michael Walsh** is the lighting designer. His numerous lighting designs for San Jose Stage Company include I AM MY OWN WIFE, EVERY CHRISTMAS STORY EVER TOLD, GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS, BEEHIVE: THE '60S GIRL GROUP MUSICAL, URINETOWN: THE MUSICAL, TRUE WEST, INHERIT THE WIND, THE SUGAR BEAN SISTERS, THE LONESOME WEST and A SKULL IN CONNEMARA. He has also designed numerous sets for the Company, and is currently the Resident Set and Lighting Designer at Cañada College in Redwood City.

Set designer **Michael Palumbo's** most recent work for San Jose Stage Company was as lighting designer for THE PILLOWMAN. Michael designed both the set and lights for the Company's production of THE TURN OF THE SCREW. His other light designs for the Company include THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK, the World Premiere of LIL' DARLIN', INCORRUPTIBLE and ANTON IN SHOW BUSINESS.

Sound designer **Rich Miller**, who appeared as the Father in THE PILLOWMAN, is designing his first show for The Stage. He has also designed sound for Bus Barn Stage Company, Northside Theatre Company and Palo Alto Players.

Costume Designer **Jean Cardinale** returns to San Jose Stage Company, having previously designed THE PILLOWMAN, THE GREAT AMERICAN TRAILER PARK MUSICAL, ALWAYS...PATSY CLINE, EVERY CHRISTMAS STORY EVERY TOLD and ALTAR BOYZ.

*\*Member of Actors' Equity Association*

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## ABOUT THE PLAY

On the face of it, *THE SEAFARER* is simply “a fable about a struggle for redemption,” as playwright Conor McPherson puts it. But there’s really nothing simple about McPherson’s tale of four alcoholic Irishmen who gather to play cards on Christmas Eve, only to be visited by the Devil. In writing his script, McPherson melded several myths to create one of his own, populated by complex characters who veer wildly from trying to make sense of their misspent lives to trying to obliterate themselves with booze.

*THE SEAFARER*’s title comes from an eighth-century Anglo-Saxon poem of the same name, and McPherson’s central character, Sharky Harkin, bears some resemblance to the poem’s titular character in that both must literally face down their demons or face damnation.

Sharky’s world is one of men, where the fairer sex is feared, longed for, or both. “If a woman walked onto the set of *SEAFARER*, the play would be over,” McPherson told the *Chicago Tribune*. “In the absence of women, men are able to revert to this infantile thing that liberates them from responsibility.”

This is likely the state that the men who visited the Hellfire Club were looking to achieve. This mythical men’s club in Dublin was where, McPherson says, “land-owning, rich, English landed gentry would go and play cards and carouse.”

“One night there’s a knock on the door—it’s a stormy night, and a stranger comes in to play cards with them, and he turns out to be the Devil,” McPherson explained to *The New York Times*. “And at that stage in the story, the myth kind of ends because someone drops one of their playing cards and looks down and sees that the stranger has a cloven hoof, and with that, the stranger disappears in a puff of smoke.

“And I wanted to sort of take that story into the next chapter, as it were. I wanted to see what would happen: Why was he there, and what was going on? So I sort of based this play around that.”

While the Devil, in the form of one Mr. Lockhart, keeps threatening to take Sharky down to hell through a hole in the wall—Irish slang for a pub, and in this case also a literal hole—he is always answered with an exhortation to have another drink or play another hand. That Mr. Lockhart keeps giving into temptation reveals this uneasy desire for human companionship, something he shares with his newfound drinking buddies.

“I think the Devil is envious of humans,” McPherson said. “He can see that they have grace, that they can be redeemed. He feels this great injustice.”

The darker aspects of *THE SEAFARER* give it an edge over your garden-variety holiday play, lessening the potentially treacly effects of the Christmas “miracle” that occurs just before the final curtain. “Unlikely as it sounds,” wrote *The New York Times*, “*THE SEAFARER* may just be the pick-me-up play of the season.”

The play was first performed in September 2006 at the Cottesloe auditorium of London's National Theatre. It received an Olivier Award nomination for Best Play, and Jim Norton won an Olivier for his performance as Richard Harkin.

The Broadway production opened Dec. 6, 2007, at the Booth Theatre and ran through March 30, 2008. This production garnered multiple Tony Award nominations in 2008: McPherson got nods for Best Play and Best Director, and Conleth Hill and Norton were both nominated for Best Performance by a Featured Actor in a Play. Norton won the Tony for reprising his role as Richard.

McPherson set out to make *THE SEAFARER* an exploration of both injustice and redemption. “We need yin and yang, both the highs and the lows,” he told *Playbill*. “I’ve written other plays where I just trawl right through the lows, so this one sort of is trying to address the imbalance. We need to go into the depths and pull it into the hopefulness, which I think the play is ultimately suffused in.”

To find this hope, McPherson looked to a 5,000-year-old Irish monument called Newgrange. “It’s a burial chamber, and there’s a passageway going down into it, and on the shortest day of the year—the Winter Solstice—as the sun rises, it shines directly down this passage and illuminates the chamber,” he explained to *The New York Times*. “And it was the idea of that—that on the darkest day of the year, somehow there was this pagan monument...which somehow symbolizes that at the darkest time, there can still be hope and light and energy flowing in. That’s something I wanted to try and capture, too.”

## **ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT**

### **Conor McPherson**

Mention Conor McPherson in theatrical circles, and inevitably someone will draw a comparison to Martin McDonagh. While there are striking parallels—the two Irishmen both cite David Mamet as their inspiration, they both grew up steeped in ’70s American pop culture and they both had highly successful plays produced when they were in their mid-20s—their approaches to their craft are distinctly different.

McPherson steers clear of the physical violence that marks McDonagh’s work; his characters tend to do more harm to themselves than to others, and they take time to reflect on their actions, although their ruminations are often dulled by alcohol.

“I don’t like witnessing cruelty,” McPherson told the *Chicago Tribune*. “There is nothing else that we know of that knows it’s alive and knows it will die. We’re all in a strange, tragic, joyous predicament. And in my plays, communication and compassion have to be the highest values.”

For McPherson, compassion comes from accepting that human beings are marvelously flawed creatures, and his talent as a writer lies in creating marvelously flawed characters that audiences can sympathize, if not identify, with. “Human beings are animals,” McPherson told *The Guardian*. “Ninety percent of our behavior is animal behavior, and we’ve just got this 10 percent veneer, the semblance of civilized, rational choice. Our thoughts are always trailing around after

our appetites, justifying them with language; it's tragic and it's hilarious. That's the picture I put together in my plays, of the animals who can talk and think because of that they know everything.”

The desire to make some sense of the unknowable drives McPherson, who studied philosophy in college, to write. “My success,” he told the *Tribune*, “has always been a byproduct of trying to process my inner life. If I hadn't been so anxious to exorcise whatever was inside me, I would never have had the drive you need to keep going. I always had a darker purpose.”

McPherson's self-exorcism includes dealing with his strict Catholic upbringing. Fed up with the notion of a vengeful God who would punish him for his sins, he left the church at age 15 and decided that “even if I was going to die and go to hell, I would prefer to be free in my life.”

If God and the Devil are still fighting for his soul, McPherson has also waged a more earthbound battle with the demon rum. He began drinking heavily in 1997 and continued until February 2001, when he collapsed at the London opening of his play *PORT AUTHORITY*. He spent nine weeks in the hospital with a ruptured pancreas and has been sober ever since.

Drinking dulled McPherson's nagging self-doubt and helped him cope with his newfound acclaim as a playwright. “I never felt successful,” he told *The Guardian*. “I felt that it was all very accidental. [Alcoholism] was in me, and it would have happened to me no matter what I was doing. Even if I was a civil servant, it probably would have been my fate.”

Irish culture, McPherson argues, makes it easy to be a functional drunk. “Drinking is everywhere; it's like nothing happens without it,” he said. “Courtships, weddings, funerals, going to the theatre, everything: it's always alcohol, alcohol, alcohol.”

These inner and outer forces combine in McPherson's work to create sympathetic portraits of those who overimbibe. “My plays are amoral in their view of drink,” he told the *Tribune*. “Drink is a metaphor for filling the emptiness. I don't want to judge the characters.”

McPherson's plays have been judged over the years, and judged well. His two Tony nominations for *THE SEAFARER* came hot on the heels of his 2006 Best Play nomination for

SHINING CITY. In 1999, he received the Laurence Olivier Award for Best Play for *THE WEIR*. That same year, he was named Most Promising Playwright by both the *Evening Standard* and the Critics Circle.

The playwright is in the habit of directing the world premieres of all his plays then never directing another production. He broke with tradition for *THE SEAFARER*, directing both its London premiere and its Broadway run.

He was at the helm of his latest offering, *THE BIRDS*, which premiered at this fall's Dublin Theatre Festival to mostly positive reviews. Audiences' expectations were somewhat tempered by their familiarity with the Hitchcock classic of the same name: While both the play and the movie are based on Daphne Du Marier's novel, the two adaptations offer very different takes on her cautionary tale of nature turning against man.

This response took McPherson by surprise. When asked at an audience talkback whether he was concerned about comparisons to Hitchcock, the playwright said, "Not until now."

McPherson has also made his mark on the big screen: His screenplay, *I Went Down*, was produced in 1997, and in 2003, he wrote and directed *The Actors*, starring Michael Caine. This year *The Eclipse*, which he co-wrote and directed, had its world premiere at the Tribeca Film Festival.

No matter the artistic outlet or how soberly he approaches it, McPherson still struggles with his success. "I'm living as an artist, and that's a staggering feeling; it's a total luxury," he told *The Guardian*. "And because you have this amazing chance, with so much freedom, I'm determined to make something that is worth that. I feel this responsibility to create something that makes an audience feel, which takes them somewhere. But that's very hard to achieve."

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