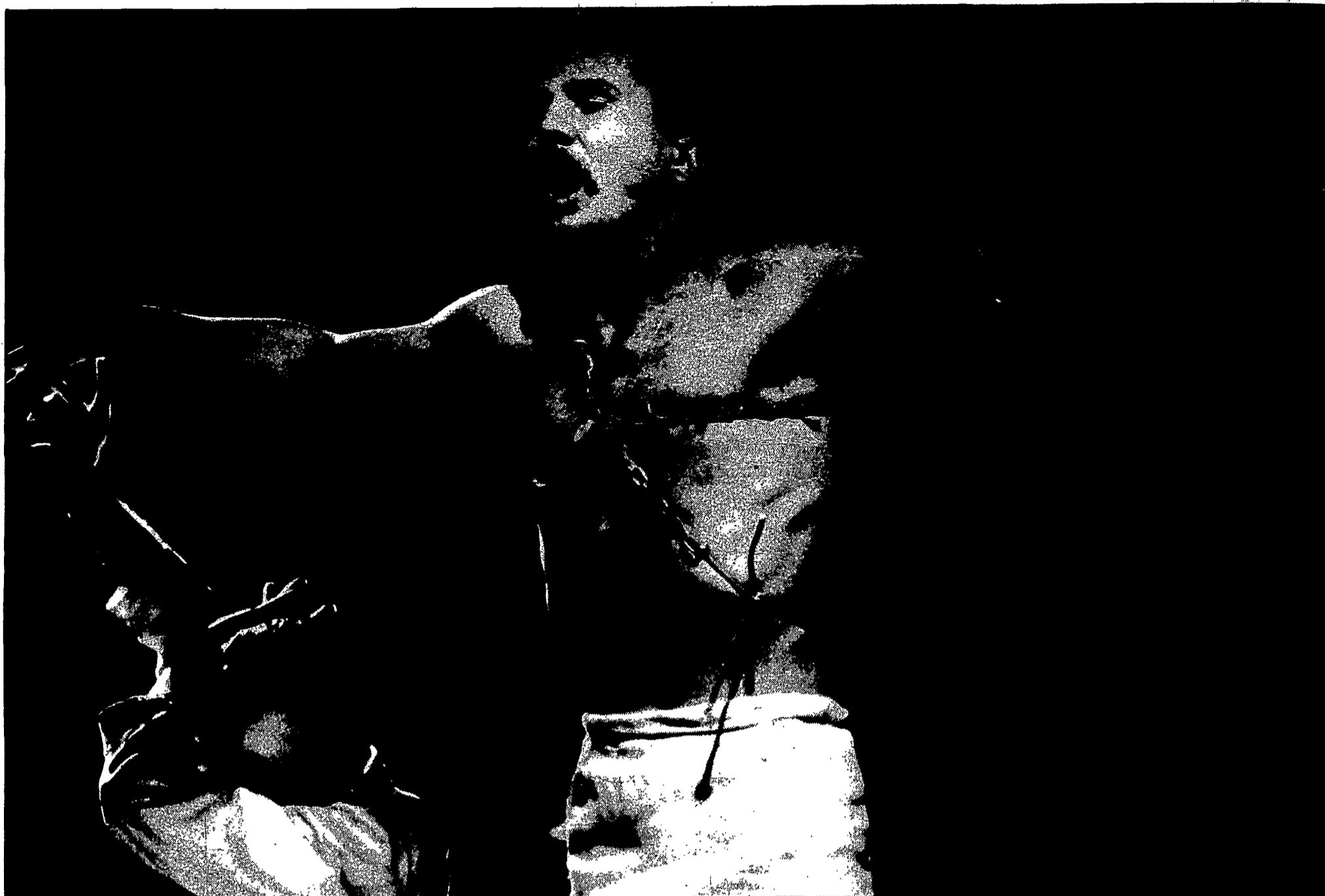


## Features



Linda Dow Hayes/Courier-Journal

Matt Talbot (Aidan Walsh) comes alive during the opening scene of *Talbot's Box*, as a coroner (Conor Tallon) shys away in flight. The play, performed by The Red Kettle Theatre Company ran Thursday through Saturday, Sept. 29-Oct. 1 at the Nazareth Arts Center.

## Irish play examines life of holy, 'obsessed' man

By Lee Strong

Mention the name Matt Talbot in Dublin, and you'll get a variety of responses, according to Irish actor Conor Tallon.

"When I was growing up, my mother would quote him as a shining example when the issue of drink came up," Tallon recalled. At the same time, he noted, "there are men in pubs in Dublin, who, if you mention his name, will spit into their pints and call him a scab."

Blessed Matt Talbot (1856-1925), an Irish working man who — depending on who's speaking — was either a saint or a lunatic, a supporter of laborer's rights or a scab, is the subject of the play *Talbot's Box*, which was performed at Nazareth Arts Center September 29 to October 1 by the Irish theater group The Red Kettle. The drama, written by Thomas Kilroy and first produced in 1977, examines the life of Talbot, an alcoholic who turned from drink to prayer.

The play tells Talbot's story in an episodic, expressionistic way. It opens in 1925 with Talbot lying dead on a hospital examining table. Through flashbacks, the play moves on to scenes covering his later life, including his actions during a worker's strike of 1913, then switches back to his youth and his violent home life, his decisions to forsake drink and marriage, and his constant struggle to resist people's efforts to fit his life into various categories — or boxes — of alcoholic, saint, striker, scab laborer, suffering worker and other stereotypes. The play concludes with his death.

Kilroy's script incorporates elements of humor, irony, anachronism, play-within-a-play constructs, on-stage costume changes and even various devices — including a female Catholic priest — intended to shock the audience.

"In Ireland, there are so many myths about (Talbot), you're forced to deal with the questions and not the man," explained director Jim Nolan. "I think Kilroy was trying to get us to look at him from a different angle. I think he was trying to distance us from becoming emotionally involved. It would have been easier to create an emotion than to make us stand back and observe."

At times, the devices work effectively. In one scene, for example, a character asks what year it is. Other characters respond by listing several years, including 1892, 1913, 1988, pointing out that Talbot's story cannot be limited to one

particular time — or safely placed in the box of history. During several instances when the actors step out of their characters to discuss the play, their remarks help the audience to realize that the play's characters are also playing roles.

Many of those characters are, in fact, stereotypes who spout clichéd but revealing comments that help to place Talbot within the context of his times and to help the audience see the nature of the boxes people tried to force him into. The labor organizer, for example, keeps talking about the "proletariat," while the capitalist points to Talbot as a proper example of the subservient worker. Other stereotypical characters refer to him as a "specimen," the saint, a product of the lower classes and a scab.

In other instances, however, the theatrical devices fail. At the beginning of the play, for example, the actress portraying a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary interrupts the priest's speech to complain of leg cramps. Perhaps Kilroy was attempting to point out that the priest's words are inane, but the scene comes so early in the play it only serves to confuse the audience.

On the whole, however, the play succeeds, largely through the strong performances of the actors, particularly that of Aidan Walsh in the physically demanding role of Matt Talbot. Walsh's performance brings to the surface the pain and the hard reality of the struggle Talbot underwent in fighting alcoholism and striving to serve God as best he could.

By removing the labels given to Talbot, Kilroy attempts to give his audience a picture of Matt Talbot the man. Thus, Talbot's life and character remain at the heart of the play.

The outward details of his life are well-documented. Born in 1856 to a poor, working-class family, the uneducated youth was already working full-time and drinking heavily by age 13. For the next 15 years, he spent all the money he earned — or stole — to support his drinking habit.

One night when he was 28, however, Talbot found himself penniless and unable to get a drink. He suddenly realized that he had been wasting his life, so he took the pledge and spent the remaining 40 years of his life sober, and dedicated to prayer, fasting, daily Mass and mortification to atone for his drinking and to

sustain his fight against the urge to drink.

During those 40 years, Talbot rose early every morning and attended three Masses before arriving at work at 8 a.m. at T & C Martin, Inc., a timber yard where he was a manual laborer. After work, he prayed in churches, attended the meetings of religious societies, visited the sick and read religious works. His daily meals were simple, often consisting largely of bread and a mixture of tea and cocoa.

A common laborer, Talbot participated in several strikes during Ireland's days of labor and political unrest at the beginning of the century. During the strike of 1913, he joined his fellow workers at the timber yard on strike, but chose neither to picket (from which he was exempt because of age) nor to accept strike pay for work he didn't do. To labor leaders, Talbot's position showed less than enthusiastic support for the strike, and he was branded a scab.

After the strike, Talbot returned to his job and continued working until one morning in 1925, when, while on the way to church, he collapsed and died. During an examination at the morgue, workers discovered embedded in his skin several sets of chains he had worn about his body as a penance.

Only seven people attended Talbot's funeral. Soon after his death, however, reports about his life and apparent holiness started to circulate. People discussed his donation of half of each paycheck to the missions, and his willingness to give whatever he had left to anyone who appealed to him. During labor strikes in which he accepted strike pay, he frequently gave money to strikers with families.

Investigations of his possible sainthood began in 1931. He was beatified in 1948, and inquiry into his sainthood continues.

The play makes no judgments about Talbot, concentrating instead on key relationships and choices in his life.

"As so often happens, history tends to be rewritten after someone dies," noted TV. Honan, Red Kettle's general manager. "I think Kilroy looks at some of the myths, and shows him as an essentially troubled man. There are some people who will leave the theater saying the man is a lunatic, and some people who would say he's a saint."

Nolan, for one, does not see Talbot as insane.

"He wasn't crazy, but he was an extremist," Nolan said. "He followed Christ literally, whereas the official Church doesn't ask him to do that. When he drank, he drank too much; when he turned to God, he gave all."

After playing Talbot for the three Rochester performances, three weeks of performances in Ireland and six weeks of rehearsals, Walsh has a slightly different view.

"I think he was essentially a good person, but he was also an angry person, a frustrated person," the actor said. "I found it challenging mentally — quite torturing — to get into the part because it was such an angry person."

The actor conveyed not only the anger in Talbot, but also the sense of struggle and loss in his life. One of the most moving scenes in the play comes when Talbot attempts to explain to a young woman who wants to marry him that his attentions were not intended to lead her on. Although he had no intention of marrying her, Talbot had seen the woman as someone he could talk to.

Suddenly the audience sees Talbot's pain at not being able to enjoy the pleasures other men enjoy, his sorrow at the hurt he has caused her, his sense of isolation and loneliness, and his frustration at not being able to explain what motivates him to act as he does. The scene ends with the woman continuing to talk about love and family, as Talbot quietly leaves the room to pray.

"I think the love scene is the crux of the play," Nolan said. "I don't think he meant to hurt her or reject her. The scene was pointing out the terrible price to follow God so completely."

The director said that one of the key ideas in the play is the nature of obsession. "I don't think he was crazy," he said. "This was a man who was obsessed with God."

Tallon noted that, in fact, none of the company thought of Talbot as insane, no matter what they thought before they began performing the play.

"Given the nature of the times he was in and the nature of the Church in Ireland at that time, he was doing penance for his sins because that was the only way he knew how to be grateful for God freeing him from alcohol," Tallon said. "I think he was devout, pious and obsessed only in the way one must be obsessed to be pious."