

GABRIEL BYRNE

Samantha McMurdock recently had a chat with Dublin-born actor Gabriel Byrne, hot on the success of his memoir *Walking with Ghosts*.

Tell us about Gabriel, the boy, growing up in Dublin.

It was a grey place. I didn't know that at the time, the reality of that. I lived in a world ruled by the Church and its partner, the State and just like other children of that time, I was never encouraged in any way, I was never encouraged to develop as an individual, any individuality was swiftly stamped out. I was taught things I couldn't understand, there was an awful lot of cruelty, it was very Dickensian.

The notion of hell, purgatory and limbo was very powerful and when you inflict that on a young child's mind it's emotional abuse. The physical punishments that were meted out to every child every day were dreadful.

If all of that wasn't bad enough you were told repeatedly that you were stupid. I remember one teacher telling me, 'You'll never be good enough for anything except the pick and the shovel!' I still can't drive past Drimnagh Castle school without it triggering my PTSD to this very day ... it's one of those things [sighs].

Could you have told your parents?

Education was the remit of the religious orders. Parents were culturally implicated in this and so these cruel educators dictated what and how you learned and certainly if you went home and said a teacher hit you, you'd have been met with, 'Well, they must have had a good reason.'

Looking back at how we were taught history, for instance, we were taught from the point of view that we were victims, that we were one of many countries that were subject to British imperialism and all that that stood for. Our history was populated with great heroes and the villains were always the British, I'm not saying they weren't, I'm just saying that this was a very simplistic way to look at things.

My best acting was actually keeping my head down, staying invisible and trying not to attract any attention, pretending to know what they were talking about even though I hadn't a clue.

Any part of schooling you did like?

I've always loved literature and stories, anything that involved imagination, but again, the Church and State were hand and glove and it's was impossible to get away from the horrors of the system.

Sin was always talked about. Purity and sex and how we were taught that girls were the sources of sin. This is the kind of thing you'd hear about in some totalitarian state, that women are constant sources of danger to men and they must be covered up, be kept at home, have their hair cut off It was all deeply confusing.

If a woman had long hair and a bit of lipstick, she was considered to be doing the work of the devil. If you put that kind of speak into the mind of an 11-year-old boy, they'll be completely messed up. We had no idea what sex was. Those young women at the laundries, their babies were taken from them because they had sinned. You'll notice the woman was punished - never the man.

I think you might be a feminist.

Well, I think women have been treated dreadfully. Life for a woman in the '50s and '60s would be unimaginable for women now and I'm always so proud of those females who fought for change, who refused to accept how things were, who demanded more. Take

Edna O'Brien, her book was burned by a parish priest; her mother had enormous problems coming to terms with this 'dirty book', as that's what it was regarded as, that her daughter wrote. There was outrage over what is an innocent book, when you read it today.

Sound more like something from

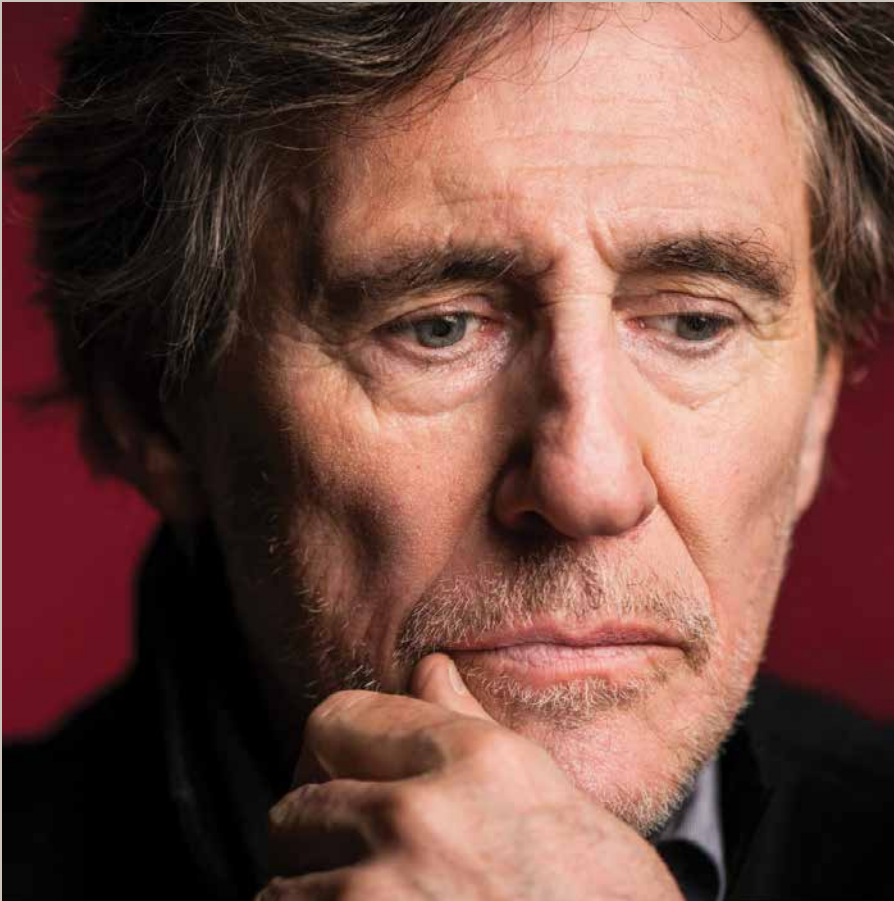
Nazi Germany, doesn't it?

Yes, you tend to think of repressed Taliban-esq societies don't you? But look at John McGahern, the great novelist who was thrown out of his teaching job and had to leave Ireland because his novel, *The Dark* was regarded as blasphemous. When he married a Finnish girl, that was another problem and he was asked, 'Why can't you marry one of your own, when there's women here in Ireland with their tongues hanging out looking for a man.'

You speak fluent Irish, do you think we need to do more to promote the mother tongue?

The Irish language has always struggled throughout the 20th Century and now, but the thing about your own language is that it expresses the deepest part of who you are. How we speak now is a direct result of our Irish language. It's profound and beautiful but it got caught up in the wrong causes in the wrong hands and it

“I'm a very shy person...”



“I still can't drive past Drimnagh Castle school without it triggering my PTSD to this very day”

became associated with various kinds of extreme Nationalism. The way it was taught was the wrong way to teach it. To help someone learn Irish you must help them love the language, to respect it and to believe that conversing in that language is a really cool thing to do. It's sad because we've so much beautiful literature written in Irish from the 6th Century onwards.

Why acting?

I never had any ambition to be an actor, I was a teacher and I had an after-school drama class and realised how much I was enjoying it. The kids were so free and open in drama class, in ways they weren't in every day life. I've always loved film and decided to join an amateur drama group, just so I didn't spend my nights in the pub. There wasn't much choice around and it was something to do. I'm a very shy person and this drama group really showed me something different about myself.

What advice would you give to any young person wanting to break into the acting world?

If it's what you want to do, if you're passionate and it excites you more than anything you'll find your way in because that will get you there. I had no idea, I just knew I liked it and I kept on asking questions. I will say that you have to be single minded to achieve it, or indeed anything worthwhile, so you don't allow anything to get in your way. If it's for you - you go after it, not with the dreams

of being successful, because even if you aren't successful, in the pursuit of it, I promise, you'll learn an awful lot about yourself.

Which of your own professional accomplishments are you most proud of?

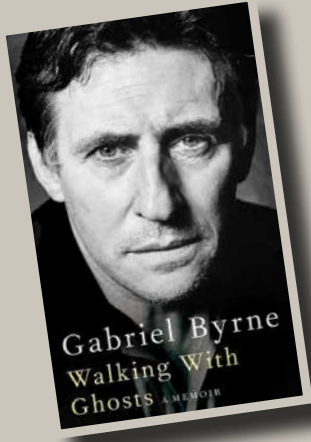
I think longevity is what I'm most proud of. The fact I've been able to keep going and change, ride the crest of popularity and keep going. I also think you can be very proud of something that isn't necessarily deemed successful if you've learned something from it.

Do you ever tire of the drunk Irish stereotype?

We all stereotype. Dubliners stereotype people from Cavan, Cork people make fun of Dubliners ... You know how it goes [laughs]. We're tribal in how we see other people, it makes us feel stronger when we look at another tribe and denigrate them. The reality is that we're fifth or sixth down the drinking chart, the English are first I think. Stereotypes are best laughed at. Like in America we see Trump supporters as lunatics who are all about guns and flags, yet I know lots of Trump supporters who are lovely, decent people.

Do you have a favourite co-star?

I've worked with every major actor and actress. It's hard to pick one person out as the list is so long and I don't want to leave anyone out. Brad Pitt is a real gentleman and Leonardo DiCaprio, I admire everything he does for the environment, and I can tell you, a lot of



“I’ve worked with the world’s most beautiful actresses and every single one had a hang-up about their body”

what he does is done quietly and people don’t know about it. They are both very decent individuals I’m fond of.

Who has been your greatest influence?

I don’t remember anyone ever really encouraging me, which is why I think you have to be determined in your own path and not wait for people to tell you what to do. Yes, it’s wonderful if someone tells you you’re good and I do believe in the power of mentoring and that a well-meant compliment never goes astray but first and foremost, you have to motivate yourself and refuse to listen to people who speak negatively. Do what you want to do and do it to the best of your ability. If you don’t have a mentor, be your own, but remember, when you’re your own mentor, you’ll have to learn to pick yourself back up off the canvas and encourage yourself to keep going.

What book are you reading right now?

It’s *Why the Moon Travels* by Oein DeBharduin.

The Me Too movement has been very encouraging for women, do you think men struggle to come forward if they’ve been abused?

I think it’s difficult for men and women and I really admire the courage it takes for women to walk away from domestic abuse. Anywhere there’s silence around something, it takes a lot of courage to speak out. We’re not a society that encourages truth, but we are getting better. For too long we’ve all lived under secrecy and silence. I don’t think we can say it’s more difficult for men - I think it’s difficult regardless of whether you’re male or female to speak out on abuse, whether it’s physical, sexual, mental.....

Do you think we all have to forgive previous wrongs done to us to be able to move on?

I think we even need to forgive ourselves, because quite often we do blame ourselves, even when we’re the victims.

Is Maine your forever home?

I live here but I’ll always be Irish. It’s a bit like Tír na nÓg and not letting my foot touch the ground [laughs].

What advice would you give 16-year-old Gabriel?

Don’t worry about what anyone else thinks of you. There’s 8 billion people on the planet and what’s the chances they’re thinking about you. Be proud of your own identity, believe in your goodness, don’t let anyone have power over you or tell you what to do. Question everything anyone says to you - especially authority figures. Don’t judge yourself by appearance. Don’t allow your imagined flaws to get you down, whether you’re a boy or girl. There’s no such thing as an ideal body. I’ve worked with the world’s most beautiful actresses and every single one had a hang-up about their body - every single one without exception. There’s so much pressure from culture to look a certain way - you be proud of how you look. Looking at others and comparing is setting you up for discontentment. You are enough. Let your inner self and identify grow and always look for kindness from others. Demand respect. Girls, if a boy does not respect you - get rid of him. You deserve the best. Always give out kindness and respect and you’ll get it back - if you don’t, move on.

** Walking with Ghosts: A Memoir by Gabriel Byrne is out now from Amazon and all good book shops.*