

Micheál Mac Liammóir



Micheál Mac Liammóir was born in London on the 25 October 1899, named Alfred Lee Willmore. He was a leading child actor of his day, making his professional stage debut aged 10 and then in J.M Barrie's **Peter Pan** (1911). The show, which featured a young Noël Coward, ran until 1914. He studied painting at Slade School of Art in London (1915) and first moved to Ireland in 1917. Willmore was passionate about Irish culture and reportedly spent hours in Finchley Road Library teaching himself excellent Irish Gaelic.

He continued to work as a touring actor and, in 1927, eventually settled in Dublin where he became the man we recognise today by changing his name. Liam is the Irish short form of William, so Willmore became Liam-móir (instead of 'more') and Micheál, a name also selected from the Irish tradition. He chose to name Cork city as his birthplace and continued the fiction of his Irish connections in all his subsequent autobiographical writings.

In 1928, he founded the Gate theatre with the actor and producer Hilton Edwards. It became an outpost for European and American avant-garde work, launching the notable careers of Orson Welles, James Mason, Geraldine FitzGerald and Michael Gambon. He was to work with Welles again, playing Iago in his film version of **Othello**, which won the Palm d'Or prize at Cannes in 1952.

Mac Liammóir and Edwards produced, directed and acted in more than 300 shows at the Gate. He was a precocious artistic polymath. The Times wrote that when *'MacLiammoir gave his farewell in the Gate theatre he played Pirandello's **Henry IV**, acting the leading part himself, designing the sets, and translating the dialogue from the Italian.'*

In 1960 he wrote and performed **The Importance of Being Oscar**. The reviews gushed that Mac Liammóir had *'invented a new art'* and that the performance *'puts biographies of Wilde out of date'*. Some suggest that it was crucial in the rehabilitation of Wilde's literary reputation. He successfully toured the world with 'Oscar' and made one-man shows his staple with **I Must be Talking to my Friends** (1963) and **Talking About Yeats** (1971).

Micheál Mac Liammóir died in Dublin on 6 March 1978; his funeral was attended by the President of Ireland. Some suggest that he acted, painted and wrote too much to achieve success in one field. I think his career indicates otherwise and is best explained in his own words:

"We are born at the rise of the curtain and we die with its fall, and every night in the presence of our patrons we write our new creation, and every night it is blotted out forever; and of what use is it to say to audience or to critic, Ah, but you should have seen me last Tuesday?"

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Images (L to R): Eartha Kitt, Micheál Mac Liammóir and Orson Welles in 1950; In the 1971 film 'What's The Matter With Helen?'; As Iago in Orson Welles' 'Othello' (1952).

Sources: Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Encyclopaedia Britannica, The Times Digital Archive, The Gate Theatre, Wikipedia, 'A Memory of Micheál Mac Liammóir' by Eion O'Brien.

Further reading: 'The Boys: A Biography of Micheál Mac Liammóir and Hilton Edwards' by Christopher Fitz-Simon, 'Put Money In Thy Purse' by Micheál Mac Liammóir.