

Mary Liston & Granagh Macra Na Feirme:

It all began when Mary Noonan was born in 1946 to parents Denis & Eileen in Kilmore, Granagh.

One of a family of nine- six boys and three girls. She attended primary school in Granagh and after school there was always plenty of jobs to do on the farm.

Mary would have joined her local branch of Macra Na Feirme, in Croom, in the late 60s, where she was very active in the club. There she got her first taste of participating in shows, music groups, drama etc. She liked it and seemed to be very creative.

Mary was a visionary, always thinking ahead, especially what she could do for her own parish. She eventually persuaded the Granagh members that they should form their own club, and so in 1972 Granagh Macra na Feirme was founded;

First Officers – President, the late Sean McMahon. Chairman, Martin Carroll. Secretary, Mary Noonan. Treasurer, Pat Joe Boyce. PRO, Brid Shine.

In the same year Mary married Aidan Liston and moved to the next parish, to set up home in Banogue.

Wasting no time - In 1973 Mary put together Granagh's first variety show for competition - 'The Four Seasons' and they went on to win the County Final that year.

With the craic involved in these Shows, and maybe a few pounds to be made, Mary came up with the ingenious idea of a competition that incorporated a mix of comedy, singing, quiz, impersonation & musical act and so -

Talent Alive was born in 1974.

This competition invited clubs such as Monagea, Newcastle West, Ballybrown, Croom, Askeaton, Ballingarry, Sixmilebridge, Cappamore, Doon etc to enter- competition was fierce!! It drew crowds to Granagh from all over Munster, for a five year period and packed out the hall each night.

In 1976 she entered the Granagh Macra group into the Feile Luimni Community Siamsa Competition. The show called 'Movin On' included talent from surrounding parishes. For this competition, the show included a song & dance section as well as a play.

In 1978, Mary entered a Granagh Macra show in Cross Country Cabaret, called 'Songs of the Sea' and won £100 in the County final.

1979. Mary's next show with Granagh Macra - 'Stars & Stripes' with a cast of twenty four. This was our first entry into the Macra Na Feirme National Light Entertainment Compet. A thirty minute musical based on facets of American Life. We performed in the beautiful Savoy Theatre, Limerick. The Judge described it as 'a very imaginative presentation, full of life'.

The Theatre catered for an audience of 1500 and for the County & Munster finals, the Limerick clubs used to fill it with their supporters..

** The Savoy Cinema/Theatre opened on 19th December 1935 with the film "Brewster's Millions". Designed by Leslie C. Norton, the cinema was Art Deco on the outside. The Savoy Cinema featured both live stage shows as well as movies in its earlier years, and was equipped with a Compton Organ. The interior was Moorish/Atmospheric in style and the proscenium was 42ft wide. The Savoy Cinema was closed by Irish Cinemas in 1974, and used afterward for live shows and movies for several years. The Savoy Cinema was demolished in 1988-89 ** See more details re The Savoy at end of this page.

1980. The Macra Na Feirme National Drama competitions were held around March each year.

Mary had already produced a number of plays - Spreading the News - a short one-act comedy by Lady Gregory & also The Knave of Diamonds.

The Granagh Macra club's first entry into this competition, was produced by Mary - 'The Hebrew Lesson', by Wolf Mankowitz..

For the L. Entertainment competition this year, the numbers restriction was lifted. Mary always wanted to introduce new faces, so she enlisted a number of people from her parish, Banogue, to participate.

Mary produced a bright, colourful and fast moving, thirty minute show called 'Weather Frolics', with a cast of 26. Mary was highly complimented by the judge, Ed Lawrence, for her "imagination and skill in creating such an entertaining show". He said that RTE should consider the use of more home material, with so many talented artists in rural areas. He suggested that they would have benefitted richly from attending the production. This was pre Tops of the Town days.

Nowadays in modern shows you have assistants to do everything. Back then, Mary did all the planning for – choreography, costumes, sets, sound.....and she hand wrote all the songs.

1981: The Granagh club again entered the Drama Compet and Mary produced ‘**The Boy Dudgeon**’ by Ray Jenkins.

1982: Mary produced ‘**The Bespoke Overcoat**’ by Wolf Mankowitz for the club’s entry this year.

Mary entered the club in the Feile Luimni Community Siamsa Competition. She produced a show called ‘**Rambles in Erin**’ along with the play ‘The Bespoke Overcoat’.

The show received awards for -

(1) Best Overall Drama - ‘The Bespoke Overcoat’.

(2) Adjudicator's Award: - The fabulous ‘English Country Garden’ Scene.

Also, for competition, this year Mary produced another Macra show -

‘**Mother Nature Discovers**’, with a cast of 29. The late Canon O’Driscoll, Charleville, one of the judges said – “imaginative” was the only word he could use to describe the excellent show.

1983 . In April, Mary produced a show with the local **Granagh Guild of the ICA**, which won the Co. Final. Participants included Mary McMahon, Mairead Chawke, Mary Chawke (Banogue), Brid O’Donoghue, Brid O’Gorman, Brid Horgan, Kathleen Toomey, Anne Kennedy, Ann Sheehan & May Houlihan.

As it happened, on the very same night in Kill Co. Kildare, Jimmy Sheehy’s debating team were after winning the All Ireland final. Team – Jimmy Sheehy, Mary Collins, Noreen Tierney & Mary Chawke.

1983: Mary decided to do one more Light Entertainment show with Granagh Macra – ‘**Happiness Is**’, with the biggest cast so far – 31. That was eleven years after she had formed the branch and seven children later !!

Quoting from the Limerick Leader - “ Mary Liston is a very accomplished producer, who has been unlucky, not to have her efforts crowned with a National award.”

1984: Mary decided to produce one more play, for competition, with Granagh Macra club – ‘**Eris**’ by Lee Falk.

Under her direction, in Drama & Light Entertainment, Granagh Macra members had many wonderful experiences of competing in County, Munster and All-Ireland Finals.

We were so lucky to have a branch of Macra Na Feirme, in Granagh, it got us involved in a fabulous organisation. What we learned in Macra, we used everyday – public speaking, debating, organisational skills to run events etc Plus the added advantage of all the Friends we got to know over the years. We also learned the values of volunteering and how to give back to our community.

Twenty odd years or so later, in conversation with her brother Tom Noonan, Mary said there was one play she always wanted to do and that was JB.Keane's - 'Sive'.

Tom mentioned this in conversation to a few ex-Macra members and the idea was then brought to a Development Association meeting in 2007.

The intention was to revive the drama tradition in the parish as well as doing something new for the community, and to make further use of the community centre.

In 2008 - 'Sive'. Mary found herself back where she started, all those years ago, with many of her ex-pupils from the Macra na Feirme days. There was a great variety of actors to choose from, all from the local parish, and Mary had an idea who would be suitable to play each character. She wanted to keep the play authentic, so she had to have the old man, Séan Dota and the young girl, Sive, and she found them both !!!

Johnny Murphy came out of retirement and made an amazing comeback at the age of 70 and the very young Emma Morrissey at 16 made her debut on Granagh stage.!!

Little did we realise, however, what the response to Sive would be and the effect it would have on the community. The original plan was to stage the play over 5 nights, but that turned out to be 8 nights.

It was the first 3-act play in Granagh for 45yrs when 'The Rugged Path' was produced in 1962.

Colette Kinsella, a freelance reporter for RTE Radio One, heard about us somehow and arrived to see our production of Sive. She did many interviews, saw the full play and the resulting documentary was broadcast on 'The Curious Ear' - RTE Radio One.

In 2009, She took a sort of a breather ,but promised she would be back..... Not one for sitting on her laurels, she decided to organise a ballad group to

compete in the 40th Anniversary of the **GAA Senior Scór**. The Banogue group of five came away as Munster Champions.!!

Meanwhile in Granagh, Mary had brought back the hunger and interest in live Drama, and the standard she had set was, as usual, a notch above the rest...

In her absence, local farmer, Jimmy Sheehy stepped into the breach and produced the next play – ‘Poor Beast in the Rain’.

In 2010 she came back afresh, John B under her arm again and set about re-creating the very famous story of ‘**The Field**’. She introduced seven new faces to the stage to fill her cast of thirteen.

It was amazing that the story of The Field was still relevant in 2010, over fifty yrs since it had been written. And especially relevant to farmers in Granagh at that time - as the plans for the new M20 route was about to split many farms in the parish. However, the money ran out and nothing came of the plan at that time.

It may have been that connection which brought us to the attention of ‘Ear to the Ground’ - RTE's popular farming and rural affairs series.

The first time a film crew came to Granagh.!!! They spoke to the farmer’s about their involvement in the play & how they were to be affected by the M20 route. They followed Mary on the farm, her daily routine and how she made preparations for a play production.

We appeared on the last programme in Dec 2010 and everyone came across really well and did Granagh proud.

As the years went by, Granagh Players became a household name and known far and wide for their professional productions – all thanks to Mary Liston’s intervention and leadership. Go raibh Maith Agat a Mhaire.

2020 marked the group’s thirteenth production – ‘The Government Inspector’ by Nikolai Gogol, produced by Jimmy Sheehy, Ballinleena. Donations to charity from the productions have gone over the E30,000 mark.