

THE RED TRAIL

**A short play for the stage
by David Farn**

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must be made before rehearsal to
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Synopsis

It is Ireland in 1916, and we are near Tralee Bay on the west coast. With the Great War sweeping over Europe, three travellers arrive. They are mountebanks, a team of hustlers selling 'healing hands' to the gullible. MacMann is their leader, a consummate showman who lives by his wits. His sidekick, Magda, has a rebellious streak. A performer herself, she dreams of creating a 'new story' for Ireland, one that might help it to heal and progress. Between these two is Sean, a simple, innocent soul. MacMann treats him like a half-wit, but Sean seems to have a special quality, and Magda has faith in him.

In this dark comedy-drama, this gang of tricksters is about to collide with one of History's strangest events.

The Characters

MacMann – a traveller, leader of the gang and a seasoned hustler. Aged about 50, he lives by his wits, though he is not above using his fists when the occasion arises, and sometimes struggles to control this violent streak.

Sean – a traveller, aged about 20. He is a simple soul, and has a handicap which means he struggles to speak. MacMann exhibits him as a Visionary as part of their show. But maybe Sean really possesses a gift?

Magda – a traveller, aged about 30. Unhappy just to be MacMann's sidekick – a woman in a man's world - she is busy inventing a show of her own. But will this cause the breakup of the gang?

Mrs Kelly – aged about 50, a local Catholic resident. She has firm views on how people should conduct themselves, though sometimes her kind heart overrides her beliefs.

Sergeant Doyle – aged about 40, a member of the Garda and Protestant resident, originally from the North. Often vexed by Mrs Kelly, he strives to find some common ground between them.

The play is set near Tralee Bay, on the west coast of Ireland. A composite set suggests a crossroads, a graveyard and the interior of a barn.
The time is Easter 1916.

The Red Trail was first produced by the Royalty Theatre Sunderland in 2022 as part of a One Act Festival, and won the Champions Trophy for Best Production, before a second performance at Saltburn Theatre.

The original cast and creative team were:

MacMann	Martin Wallwork
Sean	Tom Kelly
Mrs Kelly	Anna Snell
Magda	Sinead Linsley
Sgt Doyle	Dominic McDonough
Director	David Farn
Lighting	Andrew Barella
Sound	Alex Goodchild
Design & Props	David Farn

A Note on the Text

The Red Trail began life in 1994 as a full-length play called *The Eyes of Another Race*, which won the People's Play Award, and premiered at the People's Theatre in Newcastle-on-Tyne.

The Eyes was about Sir Roger Casement, once a hero of the British Empire, who was knighted for his work in exposing the horrifying ill-treatment of the natives in the Colonial rubber plantations of the Belgian Congo and in South America. Casement, an Irish Nationalist, involved himself in the 1916 Easter Rising, and was subsequently denounced as a traitor and hung.

I sent the script to the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, thinking they might be interested. They replied that they really liked my trio of Travellers, but resented someone from England trying to tell them Irish history. Oh, and by the way, the English stamps I'd included for the return postage weren't valid in the Republic. So that was me told! (I wish I'd kept the letter.)

Anyway, thirty years later, I decided to ditch the scenes with Casement, the lengthy monologues, the Secret Service, the submarine, the execution squad and so on, and rewrite the piece to feature my Travellers. And thus it became *The Red Trail*.

A composite set suggests three rural locations: a crossroads, a graveyard, and the interior of a barn. Lighting changes indicate the scene changes.

Scene 1

A crossroads near Tralee Bay. A finger-post indicates 'Killfaith', 'Killhope' and 'Killcharity'.

It is Good Friday, 1916, a fine morning.

MacMANN is discovered. A seasoned performer, he stands addressing an unseen crowd. Next to him is SEAN. SEAN is timid and has a handicap which limits his speech. He is barefoot and in some sort of a trance. SEAN's face seems to glow with light. Next to them is a box containing MacMANN's samples (which he also uses to stand on), a canvas bag and a hessian sack – these latter contain the travellers' possessions. Nearby, and part of the notional crowd, MRS KELLY stands watching.

MacMANN (to audience) Ladies and gentlemen! Roll up, roll up and welcome! You see this boy before you? This is no ordinary boy. Look at his eyes. As the holy book says, 'The eye is the lamp of the body.' And this lamp burns uncommonly bright! Bring forth the sick and afflicted among you, so that the light of God's lamp may fall upon them!

MAGDA enters. Also barefoot, she limps along with the aid of a stick.

MAGDA Here! Shine on me! Shine on me!

MacMANN (to audience) Make way there! (to MAGDA) What ails you, child?

MAGDA My leg is very bad, sir. A cart went over it when I was small and it never mended.

MacMANN Tell the boy your sorrow.

MAGDA My leg, please. Make it whole again!

MacMANN guides SEAN's hand to MAGDA's head. At once it seems that some kind of energy is transferred.

MacMANN Take heart, daughter. Your faith has made you well!

MAGDA This is – I feel - I – I can walk!

MAGDA experiments with her mended leg. She throws her stick away. The crowd expresses astonishment. KELLY applauds.

KELLY Well, how about that! It's a miracle!

MAGDA Oh, thank you, sirs! Thank you!

MAGDA exits.

MacMANN *(holding out a hat)* 'Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume, but lay up treasures in heaven.' *(accepting coins)* Thank you, thank you!

KELLY Hey! Let me through! What about me? Shine on me!

Suddenly, SEAN swoons. MacMANN catches him and sits him down.

MacMANN My apologies. The boy is weak now, his candle gutters.

The crowd expresses disappointment.

KELLY Dah! Isn't that the way. I've missed my chance!

MacMANN But maybe I could interest you all in some items that have been blessed by the boy's own hand. *(producing a small jar)* This little marvel smoothes away the wrinkles and puts colour in your cheeks. I call it Eternity Cream. Let's see now. Why, there's not a lady here among you in need of my Eternity Cream! *(to KELLY)* Madam!

KELLY Who, me?

MacMANN Madam, I declare it would be wasted upon you, for your skin is as soft as a baby's. But perhaps for your *mother* at home?

KELLY *(flattered all the same)* Dah! Away with you!

MacMANN *(another jar)* And this remarkable creation is for gentlemen with – ahem – special needs. I call it Rising Cream, for it's action *(with a gesture)* is coincident with the rising of the moon.

Coarse laughter from the crowd.

MacMANN Come on now, sir. You look as though you could use some.

More laughter. MacMANN offers the sample, along with the hat. Just then SERGEANT DOYLE enters. He is a Sergeant in the local Garda.

DOYLE Hey! You two!

MacMANN *(seeing DOYLE)* Come along, Sean. Get the bags! Run, boy!

MacMANN and SEAN make a hurried exit with their luggage.

DOYLE Hey, come back here! Damn, they've got away! *(to the crowd)* Show's over! Get to your homes! Go on, off with you!

The crowd, not liking this interruption, make a rowdy exit.

KELLY What did you do that for?

DOYLE Mrs Kelly. I'm surprised to see *you* here.

KELLY I wanted to see the boy.

DOYLE For why?

KELLY He might have helped with me arthur-ritis.

DOYLE You're surely not taken in by that nonsense?

KELLY When you get to my condition, anything's worth a go.

DOYLE You'd be wasting your money. Crooks and mountebanks.
(*meaningfully*) And maybe worse.

KELLY How so?

DOYLE There's a notion going round – this is in confidence, mind! –
that there's a *rising* planned.

KELLY What? Here in Tralee?

DOYLE I have it from Dublin Castle itself: unrest is general over
Ireland.

KELLY Away with yer!

DOYLE You can laugh, but it's *your* lot stirring things.

KELLY My lot?

DOYLE Catholics. Fenians.

KELLY And you think those poor travelers are part of it?

DOYLE Maybe. (*pause*) Anyhow. We're speaking again now, are we?

KELLY (*grudgingly*) Seems so.

DOYLE I've had a letter.

KELLY From your son?

DOYLE Do you want to read it? (*producing it*)

KELLY You know I can't read.

DOYLE Sorry. I forgot.

KELLY takes it anyway, hoping she might glean something from the squiggles on the paper.

- DOYLE** They've got themselves a place. Just the one room, but it's a start. And Michael's got himself a job. Digging drains.
- KELLY** Digging drains? Have we no drains in Ireland but he must be going off to England to scratch in the dirt?
- DOYLE** It's a start. There was nothing for him here.
- KELLY** *(pause)* How is she?
- DOYLE** Bernadette is fine. Coping well with the pregnancy.
- KELLY** To think any daughter of mine, a good Catholic girl, could go off and get herself pregnant by one of *your* lot!
- DOYLE** Michael's a good boy! *(checking himself)* Mrs Kelly, we've been over this. I know it's not ideal -
- KELLY** Ideal!
- DOYLE** But that's where we are and we've to make the best of it. For their sakes and for ours.
- KELLY** How come he hasn't volunteered anyway, if he's such a good boy? I thought you Protestants were all for King and Country?
- DOYLE** We are. Somebody's got to stop the boots of the Bosch from trampling all over Europe.
- KELLY** Oh yes, and who's to stop the boots of the *English* that have been trampling their dirty Protestant feet over Ireland for the last four hundred years!
- DOYLE** Not this again! Anyway, would you *want* him to volunteer? To go off and leave his wife with a baby on the way? You can't have it both ways.
- KELLY** The only family I have left! Torn away from me. Here, take you letter! Away and catch your travelers!

DOYLE Mrs Kelly -!

But KELLY has already gone.

DOYLE Hell's bells! Why do I even bother!

DOYLE stands, holding the letter. Blackout. End of Scene 1.

END OF SAMPLE SCRIPT

Note: *The Red Trail* is paired with *Steam*.
£8.99 for the two plays.