

**Gaiety**  
THEATRE

OPENING MONDAY 13th JULY 1987 AT 8 p.m.  
PREVIEWS 8th, 9th, 10th, 11th JULY. SAT. MATINEES 3 p.m.

ROSALEEN  
LINEHAN

&

NIALL  
BUGGY

# ONE OF OUR OWN

Book & Lyrics FERGUS LINEHAN

Music JIM DOHERTY

Based on 'The Whiteheaded Boy' by Lennox Robinson

*A New  
Irish Musical!*



Director  
**JOE DOWLING**  
Choreographer  
**MAVIS ASCOTT**  
Set Designer  
**FRANK HALLINAN FLOOD**  
Costume Designer  
**MONICA FRAWLEY**  
Lighting Designer  
**RUPERT MURRAY**

with  
**JOAN O'HARA & JACINTA WHYTE**

MARTIN DEMPSEY, JOHN GUINEY,  
NICK GRENNELL, ANGELA HARDING,  
SUSIE KENNEDY, PAT LEAVY,  
VINNIE McCABE, SUSAN SLOTT

Introducing **MICHAEL FRENCH** as "DENIS"

# A CHRONIC MEDICAL STUDENT

Eoin O'Brien

Denis Geoghegan, *The Whiteheaded Boy*, typifies the flamboyant and audacious personality of a genre now extinct — the Chronic Medical Student. Larger than life, gregarious, charming, worldly, cunning and yet vulnerable, the 'chronic medic' strode the inner city streets and hostelrys, and very occasionally the hospital ward with a debonair swagger. To his peers he was the epitome of sophistication. Well versed in all matters, save medicine, he could regale his contemporaries on the vicissitudes of the examinations and the foibles and eccentricities of the examiners. To all but the most perceptive, his appearance was that of a dashing dandy. The distracting accoutrements of a brightly coloured cravat, cerise more often than not, occasionally a monocle, a long cigarette holder delicately poised between fingers on one of which glistened a large ring with a semi-precious stone. A cane, broly or shooting stick according to the occasion and clemency of the weather, deflected more detailed scrutiny from discerning the early stigmata of the debauchée: the stubble of a one-day beard, a grubbiness that placed the subject as far from water as he was from God. The shine of worn cavalry twill, the balding suede of down-at-heel shoes, the fraying cuffs and the griminess masking the lighter hues of check on the leather-elbowed sports jacket giving to the whole a visual sensation of mud never quite registered due to the arresting flash of a canary-yellow waistcoat straddled by a watchless brass chain. To the public at large, the future victims, as it were, the 'chronic medic' was a figure to be accorded respect in keeping with his high place in the distant realms of academe.

To his teachers, the chronic medical student was a colourful if somewhat troublesome intruder who, in certain renowned instances, achieved almost the status of colleague. Indeed, in Tom Garry, perhaps the most famous 'chronic' of all time who never qualified and yet attained the quaint position of Tutor and Prosector in Anatomy, we find a personality somewhat at variance with the typical. Whereas Denis Geoghegan is brash, flamboyant, deceitful and somewhat of a bounder, whose saving grace is that he is a product of family ambition rather than the master of his own destiny, and in this shares the fate of many Irish children who were driven into the church of medicine for no better reason than to enhance the local standing of the family, Garry, from Kildysart in County Clare, was shy, diffident, and endowed with a sense of integrity. This, as the story goes, was to bring about his downfall when he refused to acquiesce with his examiner on a fact of anatomy, the subject which Garry was to spend the rest of his life teaching to students from all parts of the globe with such success that he once declared his epitaph in Neary's pub:

"From the north pole to the south, through the wilderness of the eternally white plains of Siberia the darkest bush of Africa, the southern seas; from the venerably aged coast of China, through the olde continent, to the beaches of the sometimes too new continent, where the name of Jesus Christ is unknown; the name of Tom Garry is a household word."

Lennox Robinson's 'chronic' is drawn from *fin de siècle* Dublin when the city was described accurately by someone as the largest village in Europe, a period when the 'chronic' may well have been in his prime, though he managed to survive well into the 1960s. The post-Second World War had brought an influx of mature students from the Services in Britain and a number of these lingered on to swell the ranks of native 'chronics' seeing little sense in terminating a most agreeable existence. Then in the 50s and '60s as regulations tightened in Britain, failed students from the medical schools of London migrated towards Dublin to impart their character and not inconsiderable charm on the city and its medical schools. Higher standards of entry to medicine and a less tolerant attitude by the administrators of the medical schools brought about the extinction of the phenomenon.

The 'chronics' were usually put to the pin of their collars to survive. The notion that they were recipients of legacies destined to cease on qualification is apocryphal. Many families in the country, in common with the Geoghegans, were prepared to send money to their white-headed boys in Dublin for tuition and examination fees, often unaware that their progeny's dedication to anatomy was of a more dynamic nature than that propounded by Gray.

Conversation, song and verse, all the better in a hostelry in the company of a generous benefactor, were other distractions that served to keep the mind off medicine. Perhaps the most successful 'chronic' was Oliver St. John Gogarty, who spent a leisurely ten years at Trinity College with a brief interlude of two terms at Oxford. He gave generously of his time to literature, cycling and the fair sex with inevitable consequences of repeated failure in his exams. He gained a reputation as a wit and character in his native city which rejoiced in his Limericks and salacious verse.

The chronic medical student is now history and perhaps medicine and society is the poorer for his passing. His colourful personality and extravagant pranks relieved the tedium and drudgery of a discipline that is the better for a little humour. For most 'chronics', time and the inevitability of reality saw them through medicine, in spite of their best efforts to the contrary, and many became successful doctors. Perhaps those who did not succeed were, as Ellen was to say of her nephew Denis, "too clever to be doctors".