

AS WELL AS BRINGING THE PLAYS OF SHAKESPEARE TO CORK, FATHER O'FLYNN BECAME A

# Why Flynnie's work



WITH preparations underway for the opening of a new exhibition on Fr O'Flynn tomorrow and the staging of *The Winter's Tale* by Corcadorca next week, Helen Walsh reflects on the priest's work helping people who stammered and how speech and language therapy in Cork has developed today.



LEFT: Sally Conneely, a speech therapist and graduate from UCC says the work of Fr O'Flynn, above, was 'extraordinary'. Picture: Eddie O'Hare

**D**URING the autumn of 1960, a BBC television crew arrived in Cork to interview one of the city's most fascinating characters.

A number of weeks later, they left Ireland stunned by what they had witnessed in a small room over a sweet factory on the northside of the city.

It was there, in a space that had become known as 'The Loft', that Fr Christy O'Flynn brought the world of Shakespeare alive and helped children who stammered.

The programme producer was specifically interested in the latter for the TV series, *It Happened To Me*.

The crew watched and recorded the 80-year-old priest at work as a young boy with a speech impediment was brought before him for treatment.

Fr O'Flynn asked him to read a passage from Shakespeare, and although he struggled, he told the boy that in six weeks he would be able to deliver lines from one of the Bard's greatest plays, *Hamlet*.

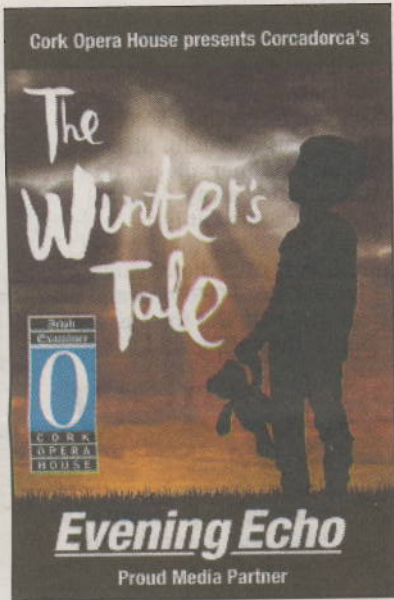
Sally Conneely, a qualified speech and language therapist whose final year dissertation touched on Fr O'Flynn's work, describes his work at the time as extraordinary.

"He didn't have any training, so it's quite extraordinary how he developed methods for people who stammered.

"He had trained in voice production in Maynooth and although there was no evidence that speech and drama could help people, he found that working on elocution and drama gave people the confidence to speak in public.

"There was a very accepting atmosphere in *The Loft*. People with stammers would often be bullied, but Fr O'Flynn created an environment where people were completely equal and were told, 'You're no better or no worse than anyone else'."

In the course of her research, Ms Conneely interviewed people who knew Fr O'Flynn and said many of the participants reported that his methods were very much like Lionel



Logue, the speech therapist best known from *The King's Speech*.

Professor Fiona Gibbon, Head of the Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences at UCC, said it was possible that Logue and Fr O'Flynn's paths may have crossed.

"They were both working at the same time and we know that Fr O'Flynn used to go to London for costumes for his productions. Both men were big fans of Shakespeare. They had a lot in common and I wonder whether they met.

"The first stammering clinics were being set up in London in the 1930s, so there would have been some knowledge and expertise about treatment, so it is possible that they would have met," she added.

Ms Conneely said: "It was before the first college of speech and language therapy in Ireland and there were no qualified therapists in Cork at the time.

"The main thing about Fr O'Flynn was his relationship with people. He had a great magnetic personality and made people believe in themselves and gave them confidence to play and do things in life that wouldn't otherwise have been possible in the extreme poverty of the



Fr O'Flynn may have met ground-breaking London speech therapist Lionel Logue, the man played by Geoffrey Rush in the recent movie, *The King's Speech*, above.

northside at the time.

"After *It Happened To Me*, he received hundreds of letters from all over the world and I believe a boy was brought from Scotland to see him. He apparently replied to each letter personally and gave advice to people all over the world," she added.

Professor Gibbon describes him as an amazing character, who had many strings to his bow.

"He always had an interest in the

voice, voice projection, and was interested in drama, poetry and in the person. He believed that stammering could be overcome and he projected that confidence in to people who came to him.

"He used techniques to help people become fluent.

"There was a time when people thought about purely the type of exercise you might do to become more fluent, but these days, therapists are much more concerned about

the person being able to have what we call strategies to help them become more fluent in different situations and to try and take away the fear they might have about stammering.

"There's a big psychological component and he recognised that and did try to take the fear away. He'd help people in front of everyone else. There was an openness about what he did. He really was an amazing character," she added.