

# LifeFeatures

Edited by Sheila Wayman e-mail: features@irish-times.ie

## Living with the healer's gift



With Brian Friel's classic play about a tormented faith healer soon to open at the Gate, a healer (and seventh son) Aidan Wrynné tells Rosita Boland where he thinks Friel got it wrong

**Faith healer, faith healing** – a craft without an apprenticeship, a ministry without responsibility, a vocation without a ministry

The definition above is spoken by faith healer Francis (Frank) Hardy, the main character in Brian Friel's 1979 play, *Faith Healer*. The play, a three-hander and one of Friel's best-known, is being revived at the Gate Theatre in Dublin next month, with Ralph Fiennes as Frank. It takes the form of four monologues by three people, with those by Frank opening and closing the play. The others are by Grace, his wife, and Teddy, his lifelong manager. The monologues tell the same story, from three different perspectives, of key events in their three entangled lives, of travelling from one rural meeting house and school to another for public performances of *The Fantastic Frank Hardy, Faith Healer*.

So, outside literature, are there people today practising the esoteric-sounding occupation of faith healing? And would a faith healer agree with Friel's definition, and how accurate would he think that Friel's portrayal of his fictional healer is? Aidan Wrynné, from Mohill, Co Leitrim, is a practising faith healer, one of only half a dozen in Ireland who publicly declare themselves as such. Born the seventh consecutive son, when he was two weeks old a live worm was put into his hand. It died instantly. This, as Wrynné explains in an Athlone hotel where he holds a weekly clinic (€20 per session), is the strange but apparently traditional sign that the seventh son will have the gift of healing.

"To this day," he says, "when I take my son fishing, I can't fix a worm on a hook. It always dies."

A week after the worm died in his hand, a six-month-old baby girl with ringworm was brought to Wrynné. His hands were placed on her and she was cured. Ever since, he has practised what he calls his "God-given gift, although I don't want to scare anyone away with calling it that. It's a spiritual gift."

In Friel's play, Frank Hardy's wife describes her husband's healing ability as "this gift, this craft, this talent, this art, this magic – whatever it was he possessed, that defined him".

Even though Wrynné has been a faith



healer all his life, and has long been aware of Friel's play, he chose not to read it until now.

"I don't read fictional representations of faith healers, because they are fictional," he explains simply, adding that it's easy for others to sensationalise what he does. Wrynné also points out, correctly, that Friel's healer is not a seventh son but an only child, and thus,

in Wrynné's view, a showman rather than a true healer. He suggests that this is why Hardy's behaviour is so extreme – excessive drinking, unpredictability, lack of responsibility – even though he does have some ability to heal.

"It's a lack of trust in himself, and he sensationalises himself because he is so unsure of the gift," says Wrynné. "True faith healers are sure of their gift. It's not

a performance for them, as it was for Frank."

However, he admits to being both impressed and "fascinated" by Friel's understanding of those people who go to see a faith healer in the hope that they will be cured.

"He had that spot-on," he says. "I deal with a lot of negativity in people, people who tell me they are coming to me as a

last resort. It's completely accurate."

Wrynné lives in Mohill, but is on the road most days, holding regular weekly clinics around the country, on a route that includes Cavan town, Athlone, Mullingar, Boyle and Edgeworthstown. When not on the road, he holds open clinic at

someone to heal them, I say a prayer to myself in respect of my gift. It's the job of healing to transfer healing energy. Anyone you meet here today will speak of heat and energy when they come out."

It's true. Everyone who emerges from the room after their healing session – for arthritis, cirrhosis, eczema – talks of heat from the laying-on of Wrynné's hands.

"It was nearly a burning feeling," explains one woman who is suffering from skin rash. "A completely different feeling from an ordinary person touching you. To come here, I think you have to have faith in the healer."

"You have to believe faith healing works," says Caroline Roche, who has brought her 15-month-old son, Darragh, who has eczema. His older sister also had it, and was healed after three visits to Wrynné. "I think if you don't have faith, you can't be healed. Faith in the healer and also religious faith."

On the occasions when Frank Hardy is successful as a healer – straightening limbs, healing pain – he is transformed:

"Occasionally it did work . . . And when it did, when I stood before a man and placed my hands on him and watched him become whole in my presence, those were nights of exultation . . . I knew that for those few hours I had become whole in myself, and perfect . . ."

"The perception of faith healing has changed over time," Wrynné observes. "People are a lot more sceptical now. They want answers, reasons, science. Twenty years ago, people didn't ask you questions. They didn't even think of trust in a healer being strange. I mean, the first person I healed was six months old. I was three weeks. How could she have asked any questions, or how could I have understood them? Yet I healed her."

◆ *Faith Healer*, by Brian Friel, with Ralph Fiennes in the leading role, previews at the Gate Theatre, Dublin, from Feb 2 and opens on Feb 7

True faith healers are sure of their gift. It's not a performance for them

home, and tends his organic farm. In *Faith Healer*, Hardy describes the people who come to see him:

"They were a despairing people. That they came to me, a mountebank, was a measure of their despair. They seldom spoke. Sometimes didn't even raise their eyes . . . by coming to me they exposed, publicly acknowledged, their desperation. And even though they told themselves they were here because of the remote possibility of a cure, they knew in their hearts they had come not to be cured but for confirmation that they were incurable . . ."

In Athlone, there is a steady stream of people who come down the mirrored hotel corridors to sit on the ballroom chairs outside the room that's been booked by Wrynné and to wait their turn to visit the healer. Some of them are carrying babies (brought here for treatment of either colic or eczema) and the parents nod at each other in recognition: the recommended course for all treatments is three consecutive weekly visits, with a follow-up call to Wrynné a month later.

Eoin Hyland has taken the bus up from Galway to visit Wrynné. He has recurring eczema, and had been seeing a doctor for years with no success. Friends told him about Wrynné and he decided to try it.

"I'm sorry I didn't come when I was younger, because there has been a dramatic improvement," he says. "Coming to a faith healer is about yourself. You've got to believe it will work. You can't come with a negative mind." Frank Hardy meditates on his erratic gift of healing:

"Could I summon it? When and how? Was it its servant? Did it reside in my ability to invest someone with faith in me or did I evoke from him a healing faith in himself?"

"I have a 70 to 80 per cent success rate of healing," Wrynné says. "But I don't take people on who have problems with smoking or drinking. I don't cure addictions." Reluctantly, he adds: "I have seen people who have had tumours, which had showed up on scans and which then disappeared after I saw them, but nothing is certain, and I have to tell people that."

Does he have to have a religious faith to be able to heal? "I'm a practising Catholic, but it's not a conscious decision," he says. "When I am putting my hands on



Healing hands: Aidan Wrynné, above, Ralph Fiennes, right, in rehearsal for Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* at the Gate. Main photograph: Matt Kavanagh



**PriceWatch**  
Conor Pope

### How much for Pringles?

Here . . .

Hanley's Station Road, Castiebar	€1.69
Tesco Wilton Shopping Centre, Cork	€1.99
Veldons Letterfrack	€2.20
Londis Newbridge	€2.49
Spar Lower Drumcondra Road, Dublin	€2.79
Londis College Green, Dublin	€2.99

There . . .

## Penalising holidaymakers for World Cup failure

You spot the prices, we ask the questions

Eamon Byrne, from Dublin, has been in touch after discovering a fairly enormous difference between the price of a French camping holiday with a well-known international operator if you are Irish and if you are British. Keen to visit the Côte d'Azur for a fortnight in June, Byrne visited the Keycamp Holidays website where, after selecting the Irish flag on the homepage, he was quoted a price of €1,554 for two weeks at a campsite in La Baume. He planned to make his own travel arrangements from Ireland and had opted to stay in a fairly sizeable-looking Supernova tent.

Curious, he went back to the keycamp.com homepage and selected the British flag, after which he entered exactly the same details as before. This time he was quoted a price of £768, which is approximately €1,116 or more than €400 less than the cost of the holiday via the Irish flag on the site.

Earlier this week, PriceWatch visited the same site and entered the same details as Byrne and found that

the British section of the Keycamp site cost just £748 or €1,087.

We got in touch with Keycamp Holidays in Cork, where a commendable upfront spokeswoman described our reader's query as "100 per cent right". She said that the main reason the prices were so different this year was because the UK prices have been discounted in June to counter a potential lack of demand from families there because of the England soccer team's involvement in the World Cup finals.

Sadly, the Irish soccer team is not involved so a similar discount was not put in place here. The good news for our reader and others keen on a camping trip with Keycamp in June, however, is that the company has "recognised this as a situation" and has decided to lower its June prices for Irish holidaymakers to match more closely those being offered in the UK.

The spokeswoman said that a new Irish Keycamp brochure was due out in the second week in March and the discounted price structure would be

**Knorr Gourmet Farmhouse Vegetable Soup**  
€1.31 for 75g, €17.46 per kg

**Highs:** This is a well-known and widely available Irish-made brand. It is also the cheapest-per-kg cuppa soup tried. A pleasingly wide range of vitamins and folic acid are among the ingredients and although there aren't that many vegetables listed – just 8 per cent – those that are present look surprisingly real when introduced to water.

**Lows:** Quite what gourmet and quick soup are doing in the same sentence on the box is a mystery which is not cleared up after eating this soup. It's hot and soup-like, certainly, but gourmet it certainly is not. It is bland and dull and the croutons are soggy and taste horrible.

**Verdict:** Cheap but far from gourmet.

**Star rating: \*\***

**WeightWatchers Vegetable Soup**  
€1.29 for 54g, €23.88 per kg

**Highs:** This tastes and smells, weirdly but not entirely unpleasantly, of popcorn. It is hot



Winter warmers, from left: Knorr, WeightWatchers, Campbell's, Dunnes Stores

### Value4Money Vegetable soup

distinguish this insipid offering. It's a little watery and a lot forgettable.

**Verdict:** Gruel, anyone?

**Star rating: \*\***

soup is rich, creamy and substantial. As it is sold in individual sachets it is ideal for desk-bound office workers looking for a warming lunch. You get 230ml in each serving, which is about 10 per cent more than its closest rival offers.

**Dunnes Stores Vegetable Soup**  
€1.02 for 47g, €21.70 per kg

**Highs:** This has the highest proportion of vegetables in the mix and tastes pretty good too. It is nice and thick and is quite comforting on a winter's evening. It also has fewer calories than