

Tomáseen Foley's A Celtic Christmas

REVIEWS & ACCOLADES

"The most affecting aspect of the evening was the emotion contained within the music and the texts. Between Foley's stories and so many pieces overflowing with pride and love of home, everyone no doubt left feeling a little more Irish than before. If you can't cross the Atlantic, at least make your way to "A Celtic Christmas."

ZACHERY LEWIS, CLEVELAND PLAIN DEALER

"2000 seats sold out!"

WEIDNER CENTER FOR THE ARTS, GREEN BAY, WI

"Tomáseen is the Irish equivalent of Garrison Keillor, and in fact the entire troupe puts on programs that are much like Prairie Home Companion – storytelling, music, audience interaction, dance and song that delighted the audience every night. All six concerts were sold out!"

JEANETTE SORRELL, MUSIC DIRECTOR, APOLLO'S FIRE BAROQUE ORCHESTRA

" . . . charmed a sold-out house at the Lied Center for the Performing Arts."

LINCOLN JOURNAL STAR, LINCOLN, NE

"A very large audience turned out and sat rapt for A Celtic Christmas, 2 ½ hours of jigs, reels and wordsmithing."

THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER, SPRINGFIELD, IL

"We had to move the performance to a venue with twice as many seats . . . the mix of stories, music and dance was perfect."

ROCKPORT OPERA HOUSE, ME

"The most popular performance this year."

MELLON ART CENTER, WALLINGFORD, CT

"Like a pint of Guinness, Tomáseen Foley's "A Celtic Christmas" is going down rich and smooth with . . . another packed house . . . at the Keith-Albee Performing Art Center."

THE HERALD-DISPATCH, HUNTINGDON, WV

"A rousing success . . . a magnificent performance."

WEST VALLEY FINE ARTS, LITCHFIELD PARK, AZ

"1,800 Lied patrons joined the stage musicians for 'Silent Night' to close Foley's warm, intimate and personal look at Irish history and culture."

THE LINCOLN JOURNAL STAR

"What a terrific program! The audience was completely charmed and captivated... wonderful storytelling... the best I have ever heard."

THE SOCIETY FOR THE FOUR ARTS, PALM BEACH, FL

"In the tradition of great Irish storytellers...Tomáseen Foley is a master of the Irish narrative and a keeper of the flame for a priceless piece of Irish culture."

TOM HORAN, REGO IRISH RECORDS

"Like a cup of Irish coffee in a neighbor's kitchen on a dark night, it was warm, comforting and full of cheer."

JUSTINE SUTTON, SANTA BARBARA NOOZHAWK

"Move over, Garrison Keillor. As a presenter of the performing arts who's always looking for a sure bet, I assure Tomáseen delivers. He deserves a world stage."

CRATERIAN GINGER ROGERS THEATER, MEDFORD, OR

"...a masterful weaver of a good tale... One of the great charms of the evening was Tomáseen's skill in relating a story...a gentle and easy humor made his tales fascinating and eminently human."

PALM BEACH DAILY NEWS, PALM BEACH, FL

"The Celtic Christmas concert here on Sunday, December 9th was so well received that I wanted to write to you and tell you some of the comments I have gotten from audience members. People told me that they LOVED it, that it was just what a Christmas show should be, that it fit in beautifully with our Arts Series and that we should have you back every year!"

ARLENE SHAW, HOUSE MANAGER, OLIN FINE ARTS CENTER
WASHINGTON AND JEFFERSON COLLEGE, PA

"I want to thank you for an absolutely terrific show! We have not had such a large crowd since the Juilliard String quartet six years ago. You are all sooo talented."

JANE CARTAGE

"You'll love his warm-hearted, poignant stories of life in the homeland."

MIKE STURGILL, BRITT FESTIVAL, JACKSONVILLE, OR

"A good storyteller . . . can carry (his) audience to another time and place. It's an art—and a gift—and Tomáseen Foley has it in spades. Grammy Award-winning guitarist William Coulter provided sublime background . . . Dancers Knight, Bigley, and Linnane showed their superb talents as world-class Irish step dancers, moving their feet sometimes faster than the eye could follow. Vocalist Marianne Knight beautifully delivered Irish songs—in both English and Gaelic.

THE SANTA BARBARA INDEPENDENT

"He's a spell-binding storyteller."

ROBERT MILLER, ASHLAND DAILY TIDINGS, ASHLAND, OR

"In between musical presentations by five wondrously talented guest artists, storyteller and Ireland native Tomáseen Foley regaled the sold-out crowd of "good people of Cleveland, Ohio" with poetry, tales and jokes, evoking a quiet evening spent sitting around the hearth."

THE CLEVELAND PLAIN DEALER

"Tomáseen Foley brings to his audience a mastery of the oral tradition that has marked the Irish spirit for generations."

ROBERT CASEBEER, PROFESSOR EMERITUS, SOUTHERN OREGON UNIVERSITY

"Foley runs pictures and thoughts across the mind like shooting stars on a crystalline night, with emotions shaking the ground."

THE GREEN BAY PRESS GAZETTE, GREEN BAY, WI

"His warm voice wraps you with vivid imagery and stealthy Irish humor."

DIRTY LINEN MAGAZINE

"With dramatic impact, Foley brought his tales to a fitting close. He has captured the charm of the wit and wisdom inherent in a locality where people lived within the shelter of their neighbours."

PAUL KEATING, THE IRISH VOICE, NEW YORK CITY, NY

"Foley had people rapt and delighted . . . he has an engaging manner, a lightness of wit and a silver-tongued way of unwinding a tale."

GREEN BAY PRESS-GAZETTE, GREEN BAY, WI

"Tomáseen Foley has made it nationally - and internationally - with his warm-hearted
"A Celtic Christmas."

RICHARD MOESCHL, MEDFORD MAIL TRIBUNE, MEDFORD, OR

"Great storytelling swept up more than 1,000 listeners . . . "A Celtic Christmas" received
a standing ovation at the end. Some people may have been standing to reach for a tissue
. . . it was heart tugging. . . Foley runs pictures and thoughts across the mind like shooting
stars on a crystalline night, with emotions shaking the ground."

GREEN BAY PRESS GAZETTE

A CELTIC CHRISTMAS AT CERRITOS

It does take some gumption to take five people on a bare stage and create a landscape
with just words and sounds but Tomáseen Foley and his talented musical accompanists
filled up the entire, great hall with warmth and good cheer. The current of Christmas was
achieved early and when young Marcus Donnelly put his dancing shoes to the planks on
stage the energy surged joyfully. The leisurely pace and perfectly mixed offerings just
glowed like a good party at a rambling house in the land of the forty shades. Foley is a
master-storyteller and his tale "the Christmas Parcel" was at the center of this show,
unfolding from his charming gift of Irish gab over the entire two-hour show. Marianne
Knight is a marvel with a heavenly soprano that sounds like the great singer Kate Rusby
and mastery over several instruments. Every tune she touched was sweet including "The
Kerry Christmas Carol," "The Wexford Carol" and "Ned of the Hill" that transfixed the
hall. William Coulter solos sparingly but his skill with the acoustic guitar is superb.

- CERRITOS INK

A CELTIC CHRISTMAS AT THE GRANADA

MICHELLE DROWN, THE SANTA BARBARA INDEPENDENT

A good storyteller can spin a captivating yarn from the most mundane topics. They can
carry their audience to another time and place. It's an art—and a gift—and Tomáseen
Foley has it in spades. Last Wednesday, the Irishman and his troupe of four transformed
the Granada into an Irish "rambling house," sharing stories, traditional music, and dance.
The sparse set consisted only of a few chairs, a black backdrop, and a hanging four-paned
window with a candle in it, yet the space came alive as Foley described the rambling
house, the term used for cottages in which neighbors gathered on wintry nights to share
music and stories. "In the west of Ireland, where I was born and reared, all the old
traditions of song and dance and music and storytelling were all once very strong," Foley
said. "'Twas a remote and rural place in the west of Ireland called Teampall an Gleantain.

And I grew up in a house that was typical of that place and that time, with the whitewashed stonewalls, the thatched roof, the half-door and the small windows." Throughout the show, Foley shared traditions that went back before "the quills inked history," as his grandmother put it, creating an intimate ambiance. In his mellifluous voice, he spoke of the excitement of getting Christmas parcels from family members who had emigrated to America; of putting a candle in the window and a bucket of water outside the door for lost loved ones who come calling at Christmas; of what a great country Ireland would make if only they could put a roof over it.

Peppered throughout the storytelling were music and dance. Marianne Knight, Brian Bigley, Katie Linnane, and William Coulter performed reels, airs, and jigs played on traditional instruments such as the bodhrán (a sheepskin drum), uilleann pipes (elbow pipes), whistle, guitar, and fiddle. Dancers Knight, Bigley, and Linnane showed their superb talents as world-class Irish step dancers, moving their feet sometimes faster than the eye could follow. Particularly memorable was "The Deadly Dance Duel," a raucous danceoff à la West Side Story between Bigley and Linnane.

For her part, vocalist Marianne Knight beautifully delivered Irish songs—in both English and Gaelic—such as "Ar Eirinn Ni Neosainn Ce Hi," "The Kerry Christmas Carol," and "The Boys of Barr na Sraide." Grammy Award-winning guitarist William Coulter often provided sublime background to Foley's stories.

Called a seanchaí in Gaelic, the storyteller has played an invaluable role in Ireland's long, ancient history. Foley thankfully is doing his part to keep that tradition alive. With today's world of lightening-fast communication, it was a privilege to spend time in a rural cottage in the west of Ireland, listening to "old lore" and traditional music.

A CELTIC CHRISTMAS ENTHRALLING AT WEIDNER
WARREN GERDS, GREEN BAY PRESS GAZETTE
CONCERT RATING: FOUR STARS FROM FOUR STARS

Great storytelling swept up more than 1,000 listeners Tuesday night at the Weidner Center. Tomáseen Foley's mastery of word and image was supplemented by four versatile performers adding Irish music, dance and song. It was the kind of artistic programming missing from the center for a time. It's returning, in a trickle at present, through the community-based Weidner Center Presents, Inc.

"A Celtic Christmas" received a standing ovation at the end. Some people may have been standing to reach for a tissue. Foley had just wound up the story he weaved through the evening, and it was heart tugging.

The story tells of his remote home area in the west of Ireland when it was free of modern conveniences and bonded by human relations. The tale tells of eagerly awaited packages from America around Christmastime, a widow, a tipsy postman and communal, caring people. At times, Foley spins comical images. Davey the postman has stunningly bushy

and animated eyebrows, "like mice chasing each other around his face." Davey also is known to spend half his money on drink, "and half foolishly."

At times, Foley's humor runs self-deprecating of the Irish. For instance, "the building blocks of life — alcohol, caffeine, sugar and fat. First, ask your doctor if it's right for you. If it's not, get another doctor."

In the thick of his story, the part of "The Translucent Heart of Christmas," Foley runs pictures and thoughts across the mind like shooting stars on a crystalline night, with emotions shaking the ground. It is a joy to luxuriate in Foley's voice and messages. The idea is to create an Irish farmhouse of his youth as families shared entertainment.

Looking around the expansive Weidner main hall, Foley commented about the "nice little farmhouse." The hall was dimly lit. Candles rimmed the front of the stage, and one was placed in a prop window. Some music was in keeping with that era — melancholy and yearning. The opening song, "Darkest Midnight," felt like December creeping over, with its cold, long, dark days.

Gifted performers provided a sampler of Irish style music and dance. Kathleen Keane, Marta Cook and Brian Bigley doubled, tripled and quadrupled on instruments (Uilleann pipes, whistles, flutes, a fiddle, etc.) and in styles of dance. Whether in soft shoes or hard soles (all the better for loud, fast clackety-clack), the three were nimble and swift. The most dance fun came near the end, when Keane and Bigley challenged each other in rapid-fire hard-sole dances, eventually playing an instrument while dancing like all getout at the same time. Cook then joined, adding to the footthunder. Guitarist/music director added color to light as well as soulful tunes, at times setting the mood for Foley's compelling stories

IRISH ENSEMBLE CHARMS AUDIENCE

MARK SATOLA, THE PLAIN DEALER

More than matchmaking, love was the overarching theme of the program, whether arranged or spontaneous. Foley hails from a small farming village in the west of Ireland, Teampall an Ghleanntáin. His father really was a matchmaker there, the last true one by Foley's account, and the focus of his first story was the incongruous match made between a 60-year-old farmer, Big Tade, notoriously eccentric and unmarriageable, and a young and beautiful spitfire of 20.

Along the way, Foley touched upon the various seasons for matchmaking and marriages, village dances at the crossroads, shaving with a cutthroat razor, dowries passed intact from bride to bride, the superiority of Irish wakes over Irish weddings, Dwight Eisenhower's presidency and the comic potential in the clash of old and new Catholic liturgies.

So smooth and logical was Foley's navigation of these wideranging events that by the time he reached Big Tade's wedding, it made perfect, and hilarious, sense when the officiating priest sternly ordered: "Big Tade, let down your trousers!"

Ireland was evoked in sound by the Countryside Players, who created a glowing web of plucked, bowed and struck strings, pierced by the tart notes of Bigley's uilleann pipes, the sharp pennywhistle or the soft, dovelike notes of the wooden flute. High tenor Hauck sang the sentimental airs with the requisite delicacy, but also showed a comic side in his rendition of "Why Paddy's Not at Work Today," which sets in rhymed quatrains the venerable "Bricklayer's Story," whose origins very likely predate Stonehenge.

Players also saluted the great 18th-century Irish bard and harpist Turlough O'Carolan, whose well-crafted songs and dances were the crossover hits of their day, acknowledging Irish folk traditions and classical modes.

The most electrifying notes of the evening were sounded by Bigley's block-heeled dancing shoes, as he stepped a loud and complex tattoo on the wooden stage, at one point trading licks with (and besting) the Irish frame drum, the bodhran, played by guitarist Coulter.

Foley also related the sad story of William Butler Yeats' decades-long unrequited love for Maud Gonne, sweetening the tale with recitations of Yeats' wistful, otherworldly poetry, including the lovely "Lake Isle of Innisfree."

The evening ended with a singalong of the Scottish song "The Parting Glass," a fitting farewell to the village dance at the crossroads so nostalgically created by Foley and the players.

GARAUD MACTAGGART, THE BUFFALO NEWS

Tomaseen Foley came to the University at Buffalo with a small but multitalented ensemble and proceeded to charm the audience who came to hear him tell about a Christmas season in rural Ireland.

Foley, a professional storyteller, regaled the crowd with individual character snippets, Irish proverbs and punch lines, generating chortles of delight. The biggest reaction seemed to come from Foley's word portrait of the postman, a key figure in the overall story who evidently had a liking for alcoholic beverages and most assuredly possessed the bushiest, most-mobile eyebrows in his corner of Ireland. At every step in the storyteller's vivid description of the man, there was space for a laugh and the crowd made sure that the void was generally filled.

Other characters, including Foley, his grandmother, a neighboring widow and her irresponsible son, round out the balance of folks in this seasonal tale, a story which Foley has managed to mine multiple times, creating two versions of "A Celtic Christmas" and a play called "Parcel From America."

While Foley was the putative focus, it was his surrounding cast that made the program more compelling. They included William Coulter, the show's guitarist/music director, and three versatile musician/dancers. Kathleen Kean played fiddle and tin whistle, Brian Bigley alternately strapped himself into his uilleann pipes or played a bevy of whistles and flutes while Marta Cook plucked a harp.

In addition to their musical talents, this trio showcased the hoofing that made each of the individuals a Champion Irish Step Dancer. They danced separately, as part of a team, and in a dance battle.

The last activity was remarkably similar to the kind of thing that used to go on between jazz tap-dancers in the middle of the last century, when they each sought to take what their opponent did and elaborate on it with ferocious rhythmic vitality, an activity that spiraled onward and upward.

When Cook and Bigley, arguably the most skilled of the dancers on stage, were trading steps, they may have provided the most enjoyable nonstorytelling moment in the whole show.

RICHARD MOESCHL, MAIL TRIBUNE
MEDFORD, OR

For still others of us, the holidays wouldn't be the same without Tomáseen Foley's "A Celtic Christmas." Foley invites the audience to become hard-working Irish farmers gathering with their neighbors at one of their homes for a raucous evening of singing, dancing, music making and storytelling.

Every time I see "A Celtic Christmas" I am moved deeply. When my wife and I saw it on Saturday afternoon, Foley announced at the top of the show that the land where he grew up had been farmed continuously since before the birth of Christ and before the Egyptians built their pyramids. It's not much of a stretch to imagine these people passing on their seasonal practices and rituals and incorporating them into the cycle of Christmas.

AIDAN RAFFERTY, THE IRISH HERALD

There is dancing on the half-door, songs about the wren boys, and best of all a genuine seanchai in the person of Tomaseen Foley, who tells a warm and witty story about Irish generosity around this time of the year.

How he does this in the enormous barn of a theater like the Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza and hold the enormous capacity audience in the palm of his hand is beyond the powers of this reviewer to explain, but hold them he does and his presence alone is worth the price of admission.