

THE MILWAUKEE REPERTORY THEATER PRESENTS

# THE SEAFARER

WRITTEN BY  
CONOR MCPHERSON

FEBRUARY 9 TO  
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QUADRACCI  
POWERHOUSE THEATER



This study guide is researched and designed by the Education Department at the Milwaukee Repertory Theater and is intended to prepare you for your visit. It contains information that will deepen your understanding of, and appreciation for, the production. We've also included questions and activities for you to explore before and after our performance of **THE SEAFARER**.

## INSIDE THIS GUIDE

Synopsis	2
About the Author	2
The Poem and the Play	3
A Deal With the Devil	4
Vocabulary	5
An Interview With Dylan Sladky, Assistant Director	6
Visiting The Rep	8

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# SYNOPSIS

It's Christmas Eve and Sharky has returned to Dublin to look after his blind, aging brother. Old drinking buddies Ivan and Nicky are with them too, hoping to play some cards. But with the arrival of a stranger from the distant past, the stakes are higher than ever. As the liquor flows, the stories pour out and Sharky discovers that he is involved in something more than a friendly poker game. In fact, Sharky may be playing for his very soul.

*"I'm the son of the morning, Sharky. I'm the snake in the garden. I've come here for your soul this Christmas... We made a deal. We played cards for your freedom and you promised me, you promised me, the chance to play you again... Because we're gonna play for your soul and I'm gonna win and you're coming through the old hole in the wall with me tonight."*

- Lockhart

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Considered one of the best contemporary Irish playwrights, Conor McPherson was born on August 6, 1971 in Dublin, Ireland. McPherson attended University College Dublin where he studied philosophy and was involved with the UCD Dramsoc, the college's dramatic society. It was here that he began writing plays. This eventually led him to found Fly by Night Theatre Company which produced several of his plays. Since this time, McPherson's plays have gone on to international acclaim, including THE WEIR which won the Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Play in 1999.

In 2006, McPherson made his National Theatre debut as director and author of THE SEAFARER. In 2007, the play came to Broadway and received rave reviews. Ben Brantley, a prominent theater critic of the New York Times, stated that "McPherson is quite possibly the finest playwright of his generation." His most recent play, THE BIRDS, is a stage adaptation of Daphne Du Maurier's story (which was also adapted as a film by Alfred Hitchcock) and was produced at the Gate Theatre in Dublin in September 2009. McPherson's first feature film SALTWATER won the CICA award for Best Film at the Berlin Film Festival.

Many of McPherson's plays deal with the paranormal and are part of his philosophical inquiry into the nature of existence. His fantastical stories are inspired by Irish myths and his grandfather's stories which ignite his imagination. His many years of alcoholism have also given him a unique perspective and continue to influence his writing. As McPherson states in an interview with Cassandra Csensitz for the American Theatre Magazine:

It's all about the audience. I'm always looking for ways to go beyond the material world. I want to go somewhere totally new in the theatre, to really transport the audience, to take them inside themselves and back out. You have to concentrate on things in yourself that are essentially human. You have to go inside yourself. What is the actual *feeling* of being alive, beyond language? It's very complicated, but it's very simple, too. Those are the things I'm after...



# THE POEM AND THE PLAY by Zoe Cohen

The title of the play, THE SEAFARER, comes from the title of a poem from the Old English period (450-1100) of English literature. Poetry of the Old English period is characterized by a sense of pained endurance, spiritual anguish and isolation. This was a time when very few people knew how to read or write. The poem "The Seafarer" is in two sections.

The first section describes the attractions as well as the hardships of a life at sea. The second section focuses on a moral examination of life and earthly success, operating within an explicitly Christian framework, expressing belief in a wrathful, unforgiving God.

In addition to naming his play after this poem, Conor McPherson also quotes a stanza of the poem as the forward to his play:

*He knows not  
Who lives most easily on land, how I  
Have spent my winter on the ice-cold sea  
Wretched and anxious, in the paths of exile  
Lacking dear friends, hung round by icicles  
While hail flew past in showers . . .*

***"The Seafarer" is known as an elegy poem. Elegy poems are usually melancholic and mournful in tone. Often times they are written for funerals as a lament for the dead (not to be confused with an eulogy-- which is usually more upbeat) or can be a reflection on something strange or mysterious. While the elegy dates back to 7th Century BC with ancient Greek writers; this poetic form was not popular in England until approximately 1750, after "The Seafarer" was written.***

This stanza comes from the first section of the poem, in which the speaker describes the loneliness and isolation of his life as a seafarer. You may be questioning how this relates to the characters of THE SEAFARER, modern day citizens of Dublin. Sure, Ivan once won a boat in a card game, but he sold it immediately, having no use for it. Yes, Sharky once worked on fishing boats, but is no longer employed on account of his alcoholic temper. They all "live most easily on land." None have experienced the terrible loneliness the speaker of the poem describes... Or have they?

One way to understand McPherson's connection to the poem is metaphorically. McPherson, who also has a degree in philosophy, is known for asking bigger questions about the nature of existence within his

plays. Perhaps the poem implies that in some ways each character is in fact a seafarer, traveling alone and afraid across the great frozen expanses of their lives. Or could we, to an extent, describe the lives of these characters in terms of pained endurance, spiritual anguish and isolation?

There is also a connection to the seafarer's plight in discussion of the afterlife. Sharky in particular is forced to reexamine his life and consider the possibility of an eternity alone and freezing beneath the sea. Lockhart, the devil figure, describes hell this way:

You're locked in a space that's smaller than a coffin. And it's lying a thousand miles down, under the bed of a vast, icy, pitch-black sea. You're buried alive in there... You are about to find out that time is more measureless and bigger and blacker and so much more boundless than you could ever have thought possible with your puny broken mind. (77, 78)

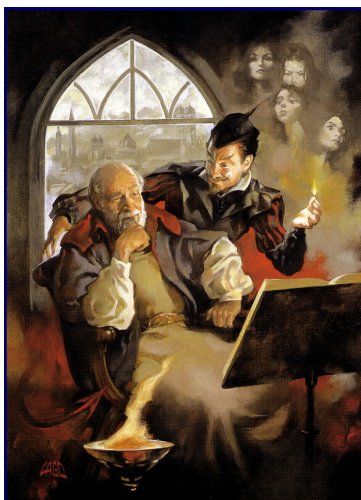
This description evokes the image of the sea in much the same way as the Old English poem. The sea is cold, cruel, endless, unyielding and isolating. And yet, by the end of the play we see redemption on the horizon. When Lockhart is thwarted and Sharky is allowed a second chance, this harsh sea imagery is replaced by something much more hopeful. Cleaning up the room, making tea, this is the start of a brand new day, and a brand new chapter in Sharky's life. As Sharky, Richard and Ivan prepare to go to an early Christmas day mass, there is profound sense of possibility and human connection. Sharky stands, reading and rereading an unexpected letter from a former employee's wife as "the sunlight seems to stream in brighter and brighter for a moment." There is now warmth, light, and the possibility for connection, breaking from the poem, and providing for a much more optimistic ending.

*Before you see the play, find "The Seafarer" and read it with a small group. Write down your reactions to the poem and predictions as to how it will relate to the play. After seeing it, compare and contrast the poem with the play. How does the entire poem relate to the play? Are there any common themes? What are they? Discuss your answers with your classmates.*

*"The Seafarer" is about the journey of a man to the sea and his reflection on life. Write your own poem describing a hard time in your life and how you got through it. Share it with a small group. Discuss your poems and how they relate and differ.*

## A DEAL WITH THE DEVIL by Zoe Cohen

Making a deal with the devil is a prominent motif throughout Christian folklore, and more broadly, any culture where the devil is a recognizable symbol. While there are some variations, there is a general outline for how this story usually unfolds. In a bargain with the devil, or any other demon or demons, the human character exchanges their soul for "diabolical favors." These favors usually take the form of youth, knowledge, wealth or power. These stories must end one of two ways. The human who has made the deal with the devil might be cursed to eternal damnation for making such a trade. This would be called a moralizing ending: it is meant to warn the reader against such behavior for fear they might meet the same end. The alternative ending is that the human actually prevails, keeping his soul, by outwitting the devil on some technicality.



*An artist's rendition of the story of Faust.*

Perhaps the most famous and influential example of a "deal with the devil" story is that of Faust. Faust is the protagonist of a German legend who makes a pact with the devil in exchange for knowledge. The first printed source of the legend dates back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but the world's most important writers, artists and composers have retold the story countless times throughout history.

In some ways Conor McPherson continues this tradition of retelling the story of Faust in THE SEAFARER. As McPherson himself put it, this play is "based on an old Irish story of the Devil arriving to play cards with a group of ne'er do wells on a stormy evening." Drawing the connection even more clearly, one journalist commented: "It's a partial retelling of *Faust* – except that Faust was so bombed when he bargained with Mephistopheles he doesn't recall his deal." Indeed, the deal Sharky makes with the devil (Mr. Lockhart) is one he can't even re-

member making. Twenty-five years prior to the card game in the play, Sharky and Lockhart played poker in a jail cell as Sharky awaited trial for killing an elderly vagrant. Because Sharky won the hand, Lockhart granted him freedom from persecution for the crime, and now, twenty-five years later, he has returned to collect Sharky's soul. In an exchange hidden from the other characters, Lockhart explains:

I want your soul...I'm the son of the morning, Sharky. I'm the snake in the garden. I've come here for your soul this Christmas...We made a deal. We played cards for your freedom and you promised me, you promised me, the chance to play you again.

Although the details are modernized, the outline remains the same. Regardless of the circumstances, a poker game in a jail cell, and although his judgment was impaired by alcohol, ultimately, Sharky did agree to exchange his soul for the diabolical favor (in this case freedom) just like Faust and all the others before him. The ending also follows the traditional pattern in that it is a minor technicality that allows him to beat the devil and redeem his soul. It is Sharky's brother Richard and his friend Ivan that unknowingly save Sharky in the final hand of the high-stakes game.

*After seeing the play, do you think that McPherson's rendition of the devil (Lockhart) coincides with your own ideas of what the devil is? What are the similarities and differences? How does McPherson personify the devil? Discuss these questions with a small group.*

*The story of making a deal with the devil is a common theme in our culture. To name a few examples, this theme appears in the musical DAMN YANKEES, the movie 'O Brother, Where Art Thou?' and the song 'Tribute' by Tenacious D. Where else do you see this story in culture today? Are the stakes the same in each story? Why do you think that the story of making a deal with the devil is revisited so often? Discuss your findings and answers with your classmates.*

## VOCABULARY

### **kip: a nap**

SHARKY: Em... Where did you... did you get a good **kip**?

### **jarred: intoxicated**

RICHARD: Go on out of that! You were **jarred** from the train...

### **anorak: a heavy jacket; usually with a hood**

RICHARD: Just get us my **anorak** hanging up there behind the kitchen door.

### **lorry: truck**

RICHARD: That used drive the milk **lorry**?

### **shebeen: a bar where liquor is sold without a license**

SHARKY: I got into a fight with some wino in the back of a **shebeen** up in Francis Street...

### **jacks: bathroom**

SHARKY: It was outside the **jacks** door. Where it was yesterday as well.

### **bonnet: hood of a car**

SHARKY: I was coming out and there was some lads messing around, sitting on the **bonnet** of a car out there and...

### **curmudgeonly: a stubborn person; usually older in age**

RICHARD: Would you stop being such a **curmudgeonly** old bollocks your whole life, will you?

### OTHER WORDS TO LOOK UP BEFORE YOU SEE THE PLAY

bollocks

affidavit

dozy

berk

sponger

gobshite

off-license

flathulach

# AN INTERVIEW WITH DYLAN SLADKY, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

## **What do you do as the Assistant Director for THE SEAFARER?**

As an Assistant Director, my job first and foremost is to assist Ben Barnes, the director of THE SEAFARER, with whatever he may need. So far he has had me watch rehearsals from the far sides of the hall to make sure sight-lines are clear from all angles. Since he has directed in the Powerhouse space before he knows that the extreme left and right sections of audience are at a natural disadvantage, but still wants to give them the same experience of the show as anyone else would have. On top of that, in rehearsals resident actor Jim Pickering has asked me to keep an eye on him so to speak. Since his character is blind, a huge acting challenge, I am watching for moments when he accidentally breaks the believability of his affliction.

Outside of the rehearsals with Ben Barnes, I am in charge of running the understudy rehearsals. All of the principle actors in the Powerhouse and Stiemke theater productions have an understudy. The understudy cast is composed of the Rep's Acting Interns, a program that gives college graduates a chance to work in a large regional theatre. In these rehearsals the understudies learn the lines, blocking and in the case of THE SEAFARER, the dialect that each of their principle actors are learning in the main rehearsals. It's my job to convey the ideas that Ben is giving to his set of principle actors and transmit those to the understudies. At the end of this process, we hold an understudy run of the show so that Stage Management has a chance to watch and make sure that, should any understudy need to go on, that they have the correct blocking and are not making any extreme choices that would disturb the performance as directed by Ben.

## **Is the process for rehearsing a play the same each time or do things vary? How?**

It truly depends on the piece you're working on, and the director you are working with. Each director has a different style. Some directors will use heavy movement techniques like Anne Bogart and Tina Landau's Viewpoints, while some believe that everything you need to know is inherently in the script and will "mine" the text for clues. It comes down to what the play demands of its cast. For a play like THE SEAFARER where so much of the information about the characters and their history is in the script, Ben has approached it appropriately; combing through the script and making connections previously undiscovered by the cast.

## **You are approximately three weeks into the rehearsal process with a week and a half left. What has the process been like so far?**

So far we have staged the entire show and have a pretty solid idea of how it will look. Mostly we have just been running small sections of the play focusing on detail work with some large chunks of time devoted to working on the Irish dialect. Like I mentioned earlier, Ben is working his way through the show with a strong emphasis on the text, him being from Ireland, is always listening to make sure that they sound like an Irishman instead of a leprechaun. Because the cast is made up of actors that Ben has worked with before, he has a better sense of what each actor may bring to rehearsals and is more able to structure scenes using choices that were discovered both by himself and with the actor. One of the strongest benefits of THE SEAFARER is that all of



these actors have worked with each other for years now. Even from day one there was already a strong sense of ensemble and trust coming into rehearsals, and it's this trust in one another and the director that ultimately leads to a successful show.

**THE SEAFARER takes place in a pub-like setting in Ireland. How will the (American) audience be able to connect to the play?**

While the home of Sharky and Richard Harkin may certainly feel like a pub with all the drinking that goes on and the collected bar paraphernalia littering the rooms, it is still their home. However, there is more to this play than drinking and playing cards. The story itself is one that audiences have been fascinated with since the days of Faust. How far would you go to save your soul? Sharky Harkin has hit rock bottom and this play is about his struggle to overcome all odds, including the Devil himself, to do right by his friends and family. THE SEAFARER is by no means an "Irish" story but instead is a very Human story, easily accessed by anyone willing to look at their own faults and make their best attempt at redemption.

**What do you think the audience will gain from watching this play?**

I would like to think that audiences will walk away from THE SEAFARER with new found empathy and compassion for those in our lives who have struggled to remain "good people" in a world where no good deed goes unpunished. I would like to think that audiences will walk away wanting to repair the proverbial bridges they have burned down in their life and reform connections with those they may have thought to have been gone forever. I would like to think that audiences will take into account what an impact their life has made on those closest to them, and that those relationships are strengthened by the story THE SEAFARER tells. However, theater is a subjective art form. It is impossible to pinpoint what an audience will feel, how they'll react. All we can do is tell the story as honestly as possible and hope that in our playing of it, that it has touched the hearts of those watching.

*What would it take for you to made a deal with the devil? How high would the stakes have to be? Take a poll of your classmates. What would they hope to gain? Are there any similarities? Discuss these questions with your class.*

*THE SEAFARER deals with recognizing one's own faults. What are your faults? Do you think they impact your relationship with other people? How so? Have you done anything to work on these issues? Jot down your ideas and share them with a small group. Do you see any similarities? If so, why do you think this is?*

*"THE SEAFARER is by no means an "Irish" story but instead is a very Human story, easily accessed by anyone willing to look at their own faults and make their best attempt at redemption."*

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# VISITING THE REP

The Milwaukee Repertory Theater is housed in the Milwaukee Center at the corner of Wells and Water Streets, downtown. Our building was formerly the home of the Electric Railway and Light Company. This name is still carved on the wall outside.

You'll enter on the Wells Street side into a large, open space. Our box office will be visible on your left as you come through the front doors. The large space is the main hub for the businesses that share this building: a bank, an office tower, the Pabst Theater and the Intercontinental Hotel. If you walk into the center of this area, you'll see a staircase on your left. You will take this staircase to the Powerhouse Theater lobby.

Inside the lobby are restrooms, water fountains and a coat check. If you decide to bring a snack, please know that food and drink are NOT permitted in the theater. However, you can leave things (at your own risk) in the coat check room and enjoy them outside the theater during intermission. Most plays have one intermission that is about 20 minutes long. You might also want to look for signs in the lobby which give the full "running time" of the play.

**For more information on our education programs and our productions,  
please visit our website at [www.milwaukeeep.com](http://www.milwaukeeep.com)**

***"You need three things in the theatre – the play, the actors and the audience,  
and each must give something."  
– Kenneth Haigh***

Theater is described as a collaborative art form. The success of a production relies upon every member of the process: playwrights, directors, designers, technicians, actors and the audience.

Plays require audiences to give a new life to performances through their careful attention and enthusiastic reactions. The audience has an active role to play and the actors rely on you to be respectful and attentive. Through your observation of sets, costumes, lighting and the work of the actors, you'll be better able to follow the story and enjoy its live presentation. You are important in the final performance and your participation is what makes this process worthwhile.

***Programs in the Education Department receive generous funding from:***

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