

Carthaginians



by Frank McGuinness
A Playgoer's Guide

“Bloody Sunday” was a dark day in Irish history. On January 30, 1972 in Derry, Northern Ireland, 15,000 people took part in a protest against the British policy of “internment without trial.” The protest, planned as a peaceful one, was arranged by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, and was scheduled to run from Bishops field down to the City Hall which was located in Guildhall Square. The British government banned it. When the group of people paraded along Williams Street, singing songs, a group of soldiers came charging towards the crowd and started to shoot. Thirteen people were shot and killed, most of them teenagers. Later on another man died in the hospital because of his wounds. None of the soldiers who took away the lives of innocent people was ever charged for the actions.

The destruction of Carthage

The Phoenicians of Tyre founded Carthage in the 8th century BC (according to legend, by Queen Dido). The city was located on the north coast of Africa around 70 miles from the southwestern coast of Sicily. Rich in commerce, Carthage was soon considered the capital of all the Phoenician colonies of Southern Spain and North Africa. Carthage is known mostly because of its role in the Punic Wars. In the spring of 146 BC the Romans broke through the city wall but they were hard pressed to take the city. Every building, house and temple had been turned into a stronghold and every Carthaginian had taken up a weapon. The Romans were forced to move slowly, capturing the city house by house, street by street and fighting each Carthaginian soldier who fought with courage



born of despair. Eventually after hours upon hours of house-to-house fighting, the Carthaginians surrendered. An estimated 50,000 surviving inhabitants were sold into slavery. The city was then leveled. The land surrounding Carthage was declared *ager publicus*, and it was shared between local farmers, and Roman and Italian ones. It was later said that the Romans sowed salt into the soil so that nothing would ever grow there again, but this is unsubstantiated.

The Story of Dido

After Dido's brother Pygmalion kills her husband/uncle Acherbas she escapes his tyranny in Tyre and founds her own city, Carthage. With the success of her shining city she comes to rule 300 other cities around the Western Mediterranean. In the *Aeneid* Virgil thinks of her as being very noble after she offers Aeneas Asylum in her city. Aeneas falls in love with her, but he breaks her heart when he tells her that he can't stay with her in Carthage. Dido orders a pyre to be built and falls upon Aeneas' sword, her last words being “Rise up from my bones, avenging spirit.” “Dido” has been said to mean “manly woman.” In McGuinness' play, Dido, an openly homosexual cross-dresser and the main character, like the ancient story attached to the name becomes the face of survival in the divided Irish society that the play is set in.

About the author

Frank McGuinness was born on July 29th, 1953 in Buncrana, Donegal, Ireland. *Carthaginians* was his fifth play, performed first in 1988. The Irish playwright has won numerous awards for his work, among which are The London *Evening Standard* Award for Most Promising Playwright in 1985, Irish-American Literary Prize in 1992, and the Ewart-Bigg's Peace Prize. He has taught at a handful of universities, and is currently a professor of creative writing and writer-in-residence at University College, Dublin. McGuinness was one of the first playwrights to introduce homosexuality to the Irish stage. He has been with his partner Philip for thirty years, although they do not live together, and believes his sexuality is a strong influence in his work. He lives alone, in a small house near the sea; he and his brother also have a house in County Donegal.

"It's a quiet life -- too quiet," he says. "I miss a bit of the madness. In the Irish theatre I am looked on as an old fellow. But I'm still a bad bollocks, you know; I'm not entirely respectable. I couldn't be. I think the younger ones think I am a grey-haired old git. But I still have the flaming red hair."

"It may drive me crazy and drive me hard, but I am never happier than when I am writing a play. I had a great and loving family, but by reason of my sexuality, I never felt I belonged; I could be what I wanted in my imagination. Theatre is where I should be." [from an interview by Charlotte Higgins, *The Guardian*]



Derry

Derry aka "Londonderry" (often called the "maiden city") lies on the west bank of the River Foyle. It was the final city in the British Isles to be completely walled, and one of the few cities in Europe whose fortifications were never breached. *Time* magazine says of it "Ever since 1689, when its Protestant citizens cried 'No surrender!' and withstood a 105-day siege by the Catholic armies of James II, the city . . . has been the symbol of Protestant triumph and Catholic humiliation."

About the play

Carthaginians was written around 1987 and later revised in 2006. It was first produced in 1988 on the Peacock Stage, in the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. It is one of the earliest Irish plays to include open treatment of homosexuality.

"The blossoming Irish cinema may be coming of age politically with *The Crying Game* and *In the Name of the Father* focusing on the Troubles, but Irish playwrights, among them Brian Friel and Frank McGuinness, had been mining this sad vein long before the cameras rolled. *Carthaginians* may resonate powerfully for the Irish. Indeed, when it was performed by the Druid Company in Derry [in 1993], it provoked a frightening loyalist demonstration that caused the actors to run from the stage in fear of their lives." -- Bob Evans, *Sydney Morning Herald*

"With what passion -- albeit unwieldy structure -- McGuinness breathes life into his play. If through all the themes of the play, there's one that seems to dominate, it's the personal journey that all characters make in order to understand the source and truth of their pain. Some, like Sarah, Maela, Greta and Dido, make substantial progress on that journey, Others, like Harkin (Wayne Pygram), surly digger of graves, only just begin. No matter. It's the process of all the journeys that make *Carthaginians* such strong theatre." -- Pamela Payne, *Sun-Herald*

This guide was researched by

The *Carthaginians* Task Force

Bryan McDaniel, Courtney Perry, David Charters,
Kali Wells, Tara Holland, and Russ Hunt

and assembled and edited by the editorial team:

John Barry, David Charters, Jessica Bruce,
Alexandre Syvrais-Gallant, and Russ Hunt

St. Thomas University

English 2223: The Page and the Stage

visit our Web site, at:

<http://people.stu.ca/~hunt/22230809/>