

We Have Always Been Your Harbour

– A Play for Voices

by Peter Murphy

Produced by Dan Comerford



First Voice (*very softly*):

It is morning on the world. Morning on the harbour, morning on the port, morning on the bay, morning on the strand. Morning on the ferry dock. Morning on the ferry deck. Morning on the lines of idling cars. Morning on the dogwalkers and the sea-gazers. Morning on the customs officers and the security guards. Morning on the car stewards waving the cars seaward.

Second Voice:

Wales looks west

the harbour east

one sets its clock by the falling sun

the other by its rising up again

First Voice:

And it is morning on the village too. Morning on the railway cottages whose door numbers number in the thousands. Morning on the Railway Club. Morning on the Hotel Rosslare and the Great Southern. Morning on the Supervalu. Morning on the hilltop walk and on the Aztec-looking steps ascending skyward from the train station, last stop on the line.

And it is morning, silver and shining, on the face of the waters, and on the promontory, on the burrow and on the spires of the sunken Fort, little Atlantis of the far south-east. And it is morning on Tuskar Rock, where the lighthouse tells us by its silence that the winter's almost gone, and spring has almost come, so rise up from your slumber, set the pot upon the hob, turn up your wireless, listen:

(Radio noises. Static. Outer space sounds.)

Three clicks, Morse for S, that's what the man transmitted, Marconi, wireless pioneer, did a test broadcast from down the bay, halfway relay between Cornwall and Clifden, dry run for the first transatlantic dispatch, all the way to Signal Hill, St John's, Newfoundland, 1901.

This channel

is officially

open.

Third Voice:

Skits and skiffle and big band.

Blues and news and classical.

And then.

A radio play, a Swansea man.

About a town, named *Buggerall* backwards.

Which became a book.

A film.

In the lower town of Fishguard.

In the year of our lord.

In the kingdom of:

Fourth Voice:

Whales.

Three of them. Washed up at the shore. Stayed a week, and then one day were gone.

My great-great grandfather's sister was Ned Wickham's mam, Catherine Sheil, who married Thomas Wickham, and they had a son called Edward, Ned, *Whale* Ned, a lifeboat man, decorated, participated in the Mexico rescue out at Keeragh rocks in 1914. His parents were buried in a cemetery in Kilrane. They died a day apart in 1899.

Fifth Voice:

The Wickham whale

don't have no tail

no eyeballs nor no fins

Ned Wickham found her stranded

on a bank in the Hantoon channel

a fearsome beast, 90 feet

parched and beached and ailing

Easter fell in March that year of 1891

Ned drove a blade into her heart

ethanised her for our sins,

the butchering took weeks

you never smelled such reek

men boiled the blubber, sold the oil

fourteen barrels for their toil

a salvage fee of fifty pounds

fish royale, claimed by the Crown

bought by William Armstrong

for one hundred and eleven pounds

shipped her skeleton to London town

where she hangs in the dome

of the natural history museum

where they come from every home in Christendom

to worship at a church made out of bones

Fourth Voice:

When I was a child my father would take his binoculars and bring me to the top of the hill and we would look out across the sea to the horizon line. This way is Wales.

That way is Liverpool. We lived in Barryville, never bothered with the steps to the strand, instead we slid the hill on a cut of cardboard, landed on the sand where lads would kick a ball around, drinking cans in the ball alley, acting the jack. I still remember it. We were weightless, we were never present, and so we never left.

First Voice:

We are your harbour

we have always been your harbour

here at your beginning

here after your end

we are the drowned

we are the found

we are the fallen

and the risen

up again

The sea is the reason the port is here. The port is the reason the village is here. This is where we are.

Fifth Voice:

First I saw of the harbour I thought to myself: this is Hell, only wetter. I came up from the republic of Cork. Clothes shops. Punk bands. Nun Attax. Nineteen, started a three-month contract with Sealink, my mother bought me a pair of cords, it felt like things were crawling up my legs. The Da dropped me off at the Pirate's Den café, top of the hill, I got a burger, cold and horrible, standing in my brown trousers in the misty rain looking over the April grey of Rosslare thinking, what have you done? My digs was the Ailsa lodge, an old boarding house, World War 2 escape tunnels, first night away from home I went down to Murphy's Supermarket and bought a ginger cake and a carton of milk and took them to my room and ate them and thought, *this isn't right, this isn't what people eat, where's my mum?* Never went out at night. Once I sat in the Pink Panther over the same pint until closing, the slagging I got. I was a martyr for the petticoat. Hitched home to Middleton every weekend to see the girlfriend and head back every Sunday night. One time I walked from Barntown to Kilrane, hamper of washing on my back, got a lift to the harbour at three in the morning from a navy guy up from Cobh, up for work at nine. I clerked the booking office, taking reservations, operations, dealing with the freight. It was different then, less regulated, you could a tell a trucker to feck off and next day he'd be back laughing. Bikers, dockers, working class, hard drinking, plenty of youngsters around, customs guys, girls coming to work the hotels, shift work, plenty money, no kids, no mortgages, *boom* town. I stayed the guts of forty years. Any question asked of us, the response was always this. Did the boat go out on time?

First Voice:

Ship comes in at morning

ship goes out at night

last orders, ladies, gents

last one on deck

shut out the light

Ah looky yonder. The captain's come ashore. Master and high command...

Sixth Voice:

... high command of what, says you, what have you got, says I: passenger management, man management, sickness management, complaints dept, psychiatrist, physician, counsellor, diplomat, boss-man, last man standing, heavy hangs the crown, all problems fetch up at my cabin door, we haven't left port yet and I'm checking legal definitions in the handbook on the Merchant Navy code of conduct, discipline, informal to dismissal, a quagmire, code written by lawyers, regulations changing, and all the time you make sure the cargo's loaded safely and on schedule, monitoring forecasts every minute, checking the weather, the weather dictates how late you're gonna be if you're gonna be late, how much fuel you're gonna burn, how much company money you're gonna spend, how uncomfortable it's gonna be for the passengers, are you gonna make your slot-time, are you gonna need tugs to assist you berthing, hold your nerve, keep chill, that's the skill, people ask, how did you learn to stay calm? By watching other lads

go mental. Driving the ship, that's the hardest part. When you get to port it's your job to do the pilotage and put the ship alongside the wall until she's safely in. Captain never touches the wheel until the final stages of manoeuvre, say you're coming into port, the bay buoy, you're on two-four-four degrees, helmsman has the wheel, you bring her around to two-five-zero, all the way in, as you approach the final turn of the berth, to starboard as we might say, I go onto the bridge wing, I take control of the console, both the rudders, independently or synchronised, my choice, levers, bow thrusters, splitting the sticks we call it, if you want the ship to go to starboard you put the port engine ahead, the starboard engine astern, the rudder to starboard and she'll turn. It's not ceremonial, lads, it's not a laying on of hands. It's the bringing of it home. It's not an easy thing. You've got winds, tides, visibility. Give me a hundred knots of wind before the pea-soup any day. Two things most feared at sea. Fire and fog. Use your radar. Use, your sounder. Failing that, your map, your pencil, chart. Why would a man go to sea, says you? For the stories. Seven years in law enforcement chasing lads who were using electricity to stun razor fish under the water to harvest them for money, then the money laundering, the Triads, I found myself in the back of an Emirates aircraft one night in Glasgow airport, on my knees, going through cocaine and razorfish and currency –

I can spot a seafarer a mile away. You know them by the stare. All that time alone. Always thinking. Good things, bad things. When am I gonna get home? Always dressed the same. Looking for an electronics store for a cheap laptop, a phone, in Rotterdam, Filipino lads, or Chinese, or Turkish lads, the odd Paddy, *What ship you on?*

I remember one time we'd left Port Talbot having discharged iron ore, went down to Falmouth, due to take bunkers by barge, the barge was to come out and fuel us and then we were to head off to Port Cartier but the weather started to turn in Falmouth when we were at anchor and the barge couldn't get alongside, and you're not allowed to go anywhere in the world unless you've got at least three days fuel reserves so there was a quick calculation made and we had enough to get to Quebec, just about the three days, so we set off across the Atlantic, but Hurricane Florence had originated down in the Caribbean and was tracking up the coast of the States and we were tracking it in turn, we were sent the warnings as was normal, we expected it to recurve across the Atlantic but it didn't, it kept going north so we kept going north, we had a Romanian captain at the time, a man named Dan, we were in Port Cartier for his birthday and I gave him a bottle of Jameson and I never seen it disappear so quickly, anyway, we were advising the captain that going north is not a great idea because we're not ice class, we were up around Sable Island, around the Grand Banks, which is where the Perfect Storm happened and we kept going north until we encountered ice, then we had to go back south again, and of course the hurricane recurved right across the top of us, we were in Force 13 for three and a half days, in ballast, no cargo on board, and just so you know, bulk carriers are notorious for breaking their backs, in other words they snap in half, especially if it's a Cape-sized boat carrier, 9 hatches, 170 ton capacity, and I remember in the cargo office, which was on the main deck as such, looking out the window, I could see the ship going like a melodeon, bending and creaking and banging, the nearest ship was about 200 miles away and it was a tanker so it was never really going to be of any

assistance to us if anything did go wrong, but anyway we stuck it out – most of us were living on the bridge by end of the third day, it was probably the one time when I thought, ‘This is how it ends.’ But for a finish, we got into Port Cartier on fumes.

First Voice:

We are the drowned

we are the found

we are the fallen

and the risen

the dead, the resurrected

from the Cape of Good Hope

to the Cape of Cod

from Malin head to Mizzen

some go deep sea

others go to prison

some are never seen again

Fourth Voice:

Before hedges grew high we could see the lights of Tuskar Rock flash through our windows after dark, twice every seven and a half seconds, seven and a half miles it travelled. Seven and a half, seven and a half. The Tuskar was always there. The Tuskar was always spoken of. The arrival of any ship was not the time of berth, but what time is she at the Tuskar. *Is she at the Tuskar yet? She'll be at the Tuskar soon.* That lighthouse is a Stevenson. Men died when it was built, going back a hundred and forty years. The Tuskar always tells the story true. On a good day it's clear and calm and visible. You're at the Tuskar, you're almost home, there's a not a lot that can go wrong. But heading out into a gale, you can barely see the lights of the Tuskar flicker, but you know it's there, it gives you ordinance, but it also tells the sailor, all's not well. When the rescue boats go out, you see the crew members' families keeping vigil on the cliffs, waiting for their loved ones to return.

First Voice:

At night on the viewing platform

I see a symphony of car alarms

triggered by the motion

of the swell

I cock my ear

I sip my wine

I listen for the wind

and sometimes I hear tell

of the ghosts of the Pomona

lost in the year

of eighteen forty-nine

Sixth Voice:

Once on the way to Narvik we received a message to say there was a boat of refugees from the Gambia, 133 people in a wooden boat, they'd bumped into this yacht, the yacht was French, its name was Epicure which is a type of spud, the yachtsmen gave the refugees one of their engines because their own was totally burnt out. The distress call came, I said we gotta go look at this so I phoned the office and the DPA and said we have this situation, under SOLAS we're obliged to respond, and I'll never forget the sight next morning when we come upon it, the boat was decorated African tribal style, heads shining in the sunlight, it was beautiful that day, we got them to come alongside, put a pilot ladder down the side of our vessel, luckily we were loaded, deep in the water, but straight away they all started to try to get onto the ladder, and the chiefs were probably only 22 or 23, but they had lengths of hosepipe, wavin, and they started whipping whoever broke rank, including the women, I can still hear the lash of the hose off their backs, and most of them had a little plastic bag around their neck with a pair of flip-flops in it and some papers, but when order

was restored they came aboard and it was arranged they would go forward into a big store under our foc'sle deck where the anchors are housed, we had food prepared but there was one chap left lying in the bottom of the boat, he had gangrene, lost a toe, myself and two other lads climbed down the ladder and wrapped him in a stretcher, we had a little crane that was normally used for fuel hoses, not exactly textbook but we got him and then I said send me down the cargo net and I put the two engines in it, I wasn't going to leave them in the Atlantic, and as we got underway there was a kind of ceremonial coming together, most of the passengers had a knife about their person somewhere, we couldn't see them at first, but they threw their blades over the side, as if to say, no hassle here, we're all ok.

Seventh Voice:

I strapped myself by the belt

to the axle of an arctic freight

and held on tight

a man came with a mirror on a stick –

the justice department

designated me a threat to the sovereign state

cos I didn't have a screenshot

of a photocopy

of a document

on my Nokia,

I got a garda escort through a ghost estate

to an overlook hotel –

I walk the length and breadth

of the presidential suite

the sole and only guest

of this establishment

ten paces right, ten paces left

where I come from

I was a chef

I push potatoes around my plate

I stretch,

I do press-ups,

I pace the length and breadth

of the presidential suite

in a ghost hotel

in a revenant estate –

you hear these voices late at night

you ask how long it's been

they say, you never left.

Fourth Voice:

Born out of the sea. The Shiels, the Wickhams, the Kavanaghs, the Duggans. Strong families. They had to be. Traded rabbits, fish and eels. The Fort was who they were. Then came the storms. Stranded from the mainland. The last family came off the fort in winter, 1924. You stand there now at low water, it's a queer feeling, like a fairy tale, a sunken town, homes surrendered to the waters, leaving only chanies, the stump of a flagpole, the tip of a spire. We keep their stories. We trawl the parish records. We restore the missing parts of history. The final entry in a rent collection log: Land submerged.

First Voice:

We are your harbour

we have always been your harbour

here at your beginning

here after your end

we are the drowned

we are the found

we are the fallen

and the risen

the dead, the resurrected –

from the Cape of Good Hope

to the Cape of Cod

from Malin head to Mizen

some go deep sea

others go to prison

some die in far off lands

some come home

like Oisin, after decades

in the land of the ever young

to find all things have changed

and yet this landscape is the same –

We are your harbour

we have always been your harbour

here at your beginning

here after your end.

Now it is evening on the human world. Evening on the harbour, and on the ferry port, and on the bay, and on the strand. Evening on the ferry dock. Evening on the ferry deck. Evening on the lines of idling cars, waiting to depart. Evening on the dogwalkers and the sea-gazers. Evening on the security guards and the car stewards waving the cars seaward. Observe the sun, silver and shining, as it descends upon on the face of the waters, and on the promontory, on the burrow, on the spires of the sunken Fort, little Atlantis of the far south-east, where everything in this place began. And it is evening on Tuskar Rock, where the lighthouse tells us by its silence that the day is done, and night is come, so lock your door, and take your old collation of bones up those stairs, and lay you down, and close your eyes, for you are home, yes, you are home.