



New film puts focus on problem that even affects royalty

BY DARA BRADLEY

THERE is a scene in the newly released movie *The King's Speech* that will strike a chord with all people who stutter or have a stammer.

The main protagonist Bertie (Colin Firth) who has suffered a debilitating speech impediment all his life has unexpectedly been crowned King George VI of England at a time when the country was on the brink of World War II.

The film shows the King trying to speak to the nation at a packed football stadium, a speech that was to be broadcast around the world. It showed him going up to the microphone and not being able to speak – the words just couldn't come out.

"It didn't show him being totally humiliated, it cut away to another scene but it just showed enough of how difficult speaking is for people who stutter. When the King couldn't speak, you could see everyone in the crowd was a bit uncomfortable and embarrassed. That embarrassment and feeling ashamed is common for people who stutter," said James McCormack, an Oranmore man who is a member of the Galway branch of the Irish Stammering Association.

Whereas in the film *A Fish Called Wanda* where Michael Palin plays Ken, who is laughed at and ridiculed for his speech impediment, James says *The King's Speech* is the first mainstream realistic representation of stammering and the effect it can have on people's everyday lives.

"I think it is the first movie that really deals with this subject in a very satisfactory way. . . the film showed the sheer frustration and anger that people who stutter have when they can't say what it is they want to say. That's one of the most debilitating things about stuttering – there's so much



James McCormack at the Omniplex Cinema. "The stutter always shows up at the wrong time," he says. PHOTO: JOE O'SHAUGHNESSY.

fear about it, and you feel so ashamed and so useless, particularly when you're younger or in school where you may be bullied by others for the way you speak."

All people who stutter will be able to relate to the film, says James, as he explains

that, much like the King attempting to make his stadium address, a stutter will come up at the most inopportune moments.

"The stutter always shows up at the wrong time. Any situation that normally provokes anxiety for people that don't

stutter will be even more difficult for a person that stutters because the anxiety increases and the stuttering increases.

"Some people would have serious difficulty with a stutter, for example, it may affect the choices they make about employment – they may study

to be an architect or solicitor and get the degree but not go on to practice because it would involve speaking publicly at meetings.

"Think of situations like meeting a bank manager or a school principal . . . even being stopped by a Garda at a check-

point can be very difficult. One of the most difficult things for people who stutter is to say their name and address. So, being stopped by a Garda is very difficult because you are anxious, start to stutter then your heart is pounding and you start think-

ing 'he thinks I'm drunk' because you are stuttering and then that anxiety makes you stutter even more! The more one attempts to stop stuttering the more they will stutter – that's the paradox. If you consciously try to stop stuttering you'll just stutter more," he says.

James recalls some everyday activities that turned into embarrassing moments because of a stammer. Like the times when he'd wait outside the corner shop, waiting for the counter to be clear of customers, run in and attempt to ask for Benson and Hedges cigarettes. "I'd get anxious, wouldn't be able to say what I wanted and end up having to write it on a piece of paper".

Or the times in Dublin when he'd have to breathe on the window of the bus and write in the condensation with his finger to indicate to the driver what fare he wanted. "You'd hear people sniggering and others embarrassed, not wanting to look – you'd feel so ashamed".

The launch of *The King's Speech* is timely for the Galway ISA to get their message across. There are 45,000 people in Ireland with a stutter (they don't refer to themselves as stutters), an impediment that affects 1% of the world population, across all cultures and continents.

There is a core group of 10 members in the Galway branch of ISA (Irish Stammering Association) but because it's the only self-help group for people who stutter in the west, the numbers attending monthly meetings vary with guest speakers and visitors from surrounding western counties. This week the group watched the movie together in the Omniplex Cinema.

Speaking to James you'd hardly know he has a speech impediment – his speech is clearer than most. He explains that a stammer or stutter is not

something that can be cured, but he says the film will help those who stutter to find their voice.

"What really impressed me about *The King's Speech* was that it was both real and optimistic. It did not hide the reality of how difficult it can be to have a stammer, the secrecy, the associated avoidance of speaking situations and holding oneself back from life's opportunities.

"However, it shows what can happen if a person who stammers finds a therapist and programme they can connect with, and that even though there will certainly be challenges and oftentimes uncomfortable and hard work involved, by staying with it over time, significant change can occur that enables the person to live without the influence of their stammer.

"In fact, like in the movie, a person's stammer and how they deal with it can become a part of their identity they can be very proud of. It also highlights the importance of support from professionals, family members and friends on this journey.

"The movie also highlights a general lack of knowledge about stammering that unfortunately is still prevalent today. This indicates a need for more resources to train specialist speech and language therapists and further research into the field to enable the development of more effective programmes," adds James.

The Galway ISA meets in the Morris Suite, of the Radisson Blu Hotel, Lough Atalia Road on the second Tuesday of every month at 8pm, where members share their experiences of the previous four weeks. New members are welcome. More information and helpful hints for people who don't stutter if they meet someone who does is available on www.stammeringireland.com.

Free offer of new home – but Macnas can't afford it

Community arts group unable to raise €450,000 to develop site

BY CIARAN TIERNEY

COMMUNITY arts group Macnas would welcome proposals to share their proposed new home with other community and arts organisations in the city if it meant that funding could be secured for the €1.6 million project in the Westside.

As they celebrate their 25th year, the group which brings the annual street parade to Galway every July is finding it impossible to raise the approximately €450,000 required for their new home to take shape at Bothar le Cheile.

Less than two years ago, Macnas was thrilled when €470,000 was earmarked for their new home under Access Two funding from the Department of Arts, Sports, and Tourism. The City Council stepped in with an offer of a free site for the project and the only stipulation was that the arts group would have to match the Access Two allocation.

Additional funding would

also have been required to put the finishing touches on a building which was due for a completion on a 0.55 hectare site at Westside.

Since then, Macnas have been unable to source the €450,000 or so which would only bring the project to the 'shell stage' and no progress

"We just cannot raise the funding, but we will try to work something out"

has been made in relation to a facility which would provide the group with a permanent state-of-the-art home in the city.

The project has been in something of a 'limbo' since September 2009 and concerns were expressed at this week's City Council meeting that the organisation would not be able to secure the funding required in the current economic cli-

mate. As a result, city officials and elected representatives are due to meet with the group's Board of Directors to discuss the project's future in the coming weeks.

"To date we have been able to raise about €150,000 and there is an additional €300,000 required just to bring the project to the 'shell' stage," said Macnas Board member Alistair Purdy yesterday.

"We would not be able to operate the building at that stage, as additional funding would be needed to turn it into a working home. We have been trying to raise this funding by talking to other groups and organisations and we are now wondering whether it would be possible to work with the City Council and bring in other arts groups.

"We have no huge interest in owning a building and, to be fair, the City Council have been very good to us since this project was first announced. We just cannot raise the funding, but we will try to work something out. It would be a



Dave Donovan at the Macnas workshop at the Fisheries Field. PHOTO: JOE O'SHAUGHNESSY.

shame to lose this Access Two funding."

Since their inception back in 1986, the group have been based at lands owned by NUI Galway at Fisheries Field. While the city centre premises has been ideal for organising spectacles in the heart of Galway, it has not always been ideal in terms of storage, rehearsal, and performance space.

So, the September 2009 announcement of funding for a new home appeared to have

given Macnas the long-term security they craved. At the City Council meeting this week, Cllr Billy Cameron (Labour) expressed concerns that they would have to move out of the NUI Galway site at some stage.

"As good as the City Council have been to us, NUI Galway have been especially good to us down through the years," said Mr Purdy. "We have to work with whatever plans NUI Galway have and there are significant drawbacks with

Fisheries Field, as it is an old building and we are always struggling for space.

"Goodwill has kept us going, really, as sometimes it's been a matter of begging and borrowing for space. Bradley Motors have also been great in allowing us to use their facilities."

Mr Purdy said that Macnas was facing a very exciting 25th year, as they prepare to bring the show which went down so well at the Dublin Fringe Festival in 2010 – their first spec-

tle in the capital in eight years – on a nationwide tour.

Macnas gave community employment opportunities to dozens of Galway-based artists in the last recession of the 1980s and now find themselves in a similar economic climate as they struggle to finance their new home.

Their street parades are seen as the high point of the summer in Galway and they have also made national and global headlines thanks to the construction of a giant Gulliver

statue in the 1980s and a huge European tour with U2, taking in 42 countries, in the 1990s.

"We have a very significant plan for this year and the Arts Council has asked us to be more broad-based, by bringing more shows outside Galway. We are in a very, very good place after 25 years and we intend to collaborate with Galway City Council. It is up to all of us to roll up our sleeves and ensure that the Access Two funding is not lost," said Mr Purdy.