

## Vincent Dowling remembers a friend and painter, maker of priceless delicate works of art

**A** SAD story is best for winter," says the young prince to his mother in *A Winter's Tale*. "And that's true, too," said Shakespeare in another of his great plays.

This is my *Winter's Tale*.

When I got back to my apartment in Kent State University last Monday night, my home for the last and the next month, the rehearsal period for my production of *A Winter's Tale*, there was a message from my daughter Bairbre: "John Kelly has died, do you have an address for his family?"

I didn't have to ask her, "What John Kelly?" I knew it was my friend, the artist, the painter, lovely John Kelly.

I was by myself, I had just come back from a nigh perfect day in Amish country in central Ohio just driving through the rolling hills, the surprisingly deep fertile valleys where the Amish people farm with ploughs drawn by three horse teams.

Where on the narrow roads you see miniature coaches with mostly one black-suited, hatted, elderly bearded man per vehicle, who casually holds the reins and keeps his dainty stepping pony moving at breakneck speed. Less frequently, an Amish schoolgirl, facing oncoming pony and motor traffic with never a glance to right or left.

I recognised a side road where 20 years ago I had chosen to bring Gus Martin to talk about coming back to the Abbey in 1987 as artistic director. The two actor friends I was spending yesterday with were intrigued that I should have chosen such a location for such a discussion.

I thought of the Abbey again when I got Bairbre's message about John Kelly. My first day back at the Abbey, the doorman brought me a small parcel that had been left for me at the front of house. "John Kelly, the painter, left it for you," he said.

"Is he still down there?" I asked. "No. I asked him would I call you on the phone, but he said no, it was just a little welcome home thing. He'd see you another time when you're

more settled," he said. I opened it. It was a framed painting of Vincent van Gogh with a headline and text headed "A letter for Vincent".

Back in the early Fifties my brother Jack introduced me to John Kelly. Philip O'Flynn and myself suggested to the Abbey that John, whose work we had loved from the first, should do the back cloth for a play we were doing at the Queen's about the election of a Pope. It was magnificent, a gigantic recreation of De Vinci's *Last Supper*.

That Christmas when I visited John and his wife Mairead (and their cat that thought it was a dog. So it would carry the newspaper in its teeth), I brought them some little gift. He gave me an etching of his. I still have it, of course. It is a crucifixion. But not just a crucifixion. This crucifixion had "A Jesus" on the cross, held up there without help of a single nail. Virtually dancing on air. I call it John Kelly's Dancing Jesus.

The first painting I ever bought, one of my most precious possessions, was at one of the early exhibitions in the Focus Gallery opposite the "new" Abbey stage door on Lower Abbey Street. It is of a beautiful woman, her naked white back facing you, as she sits on a blueish-purple line on top of a divan bed or couch. I fell in love with her at first sight. I was opening the exhibition at John's request. John wanted to give her to me. I said absolutely, "No," but could I put 10 shillings down, and pay 10 shillings a week till it was paid? He agreed. That was around 1967. It took me 33 weeks to pay it off!

I remember saying to John I needed to ask him some questions about his approach to painting, so I could talk about it at the opening. Over a pint in The Plough on Marlborough Street, he told me, in his quiet, soft, modest, Dublin way, "I am not an intellectual. But I get an idea, so I paint a circle around it and that's my idea and that's my painting." Well, I have three of those paintings, three priceless delicate works of fine art.

I don't have to tell anyone who has a John Kelly what a treasure she or he has. But, if you have not and you can get one, afford one, do yourself a favour. You will live together happy ever after.

Thank you, John, for being the person, the artist, the friend you are.