

Powerful: Actors in Caitriona's play *The Marian Hotel*

CAITRIONA Cunningham should have been enjoying the end of her teenage years, snapping up the latest release from one of her favourite bands, Thin Lizzy, and chatting with her friends about the style on *Top Of The Pops*.

Instead she found herself in front of a Mother Superior, weeping for the child who had been taken away from her and begging to find out where her daughter was.

The year was 1979 and at 19, Caitriona was just one of hundreds, if not thousands, of girls who found themselves in Marianvale, a mother and baby institution run by the Good Shepherd Sisters on the outskirts of Newry, Co Down, more than 180km from her Derry home.

Now 64, Caitriona is finally able to speak about what happened to her and has turned her experience into a new play, *The Marian Hotel*, the nickname she and the friends she made gave to the home they found themselves in.

Already it has sold out dates and is being snapped up for theatres across Ireland, detailing as it does a story of strength in heartbreaking circumstances.

"I was 19 and had dropped out of school when I felt pregnant," Caitriona explains.

"At that time when you were pregnant and on your own, there was a lot of whispering and judge-



by Maeve Quigley

ment, and it's a very uncomfortable place to be. I had heard of someone who went to Marianvale and kept their baby.

"Outwardly I would have looked very confident, but on the inside I was very frightened and I was wondering what was going to happen to me and would I be able to cope with the baby and all that."

"So I thought if I got away that this would help, that I would get time to think and people to help me."

Unusually it was Caitriona's own decision to go into Marianvale as she had decided she would sort out her own problem. She was four months pregnant and her bump was beginning to show.

"I went in to my parents and said, 'I'm pregnant and I'm going to this place called Marianvale for unmarried mothers', as we were called then. I was quite headstrong and just went in and announced it and that was that, off I went."

It was during some of the worst times of the Troubles too and she says her parents, though shocked, went along with her decision because they trusted the Church.

"We had gone to Benburon on a

school retreat and it was lovely and they were very nice to us there so I thought Marianvale would be the same," she says. "It wasn't. But I had taken that step myself and I suppose I blamed myself for what happened afterwards in a way."

Caitriona remembers a strange feeling when she went through the doors of Marianvale, with its stained glass windows and tiled floors.

"The main building was attached to a convent and the first thing that struck me was the feeling of sadness," she says. "When I got to know a few of the older girls, that changed – those friendships got us through – but it was very regimented. Nobody talked about keeping their baby, it was all geared towards adoption."

During her time in Marianvale, Caitriona didn't see anyone being physically mistreated but in the laundry there were a couple of women who were there permanently.

"They were totally institutionalised," she recalls. "But I got institutionalised as well – very quickly you got into the rhythm of the place and you went along with everything."

"You got up in the morning, went to Mass and when you came back you did cleaning and chores. You went into the laundry and hung up sheets. There was a girl who felt carrying a big container and there was a bit of panic around that, so after that we just hung up sheets."

"In the evenings we did a lot of knitting. Some people made weaved toys – the nuns gave you the stuff to make them and you gave the finished toy back to them. I was told later on that these were sold but I didn't know that at the time."

For some time, Caitriona was sure she would be able to keep her baby but when the social worker from the Catholic Adoption Agency came in, things changed dramatically for her.

"We had a conversation and I knew afterwards that that woman had control over me and my child

She gave me rosary beads and said to get on with my life

That was the cold reaction of a Mother Superior to this teenager, whose baby had been taken from her just after birth. More than 40 years later, she has made the miracle of how she got her daughter back into a powerful play

"I felt totally helpless," she says. "I realised this was not a place for unmarried mothers. This was what I now call an adoption factory."

"I had always intended to take my baby home, I just thought I would get helped in some way by going there. But after talking to her I realised that wasn't going to be the way."

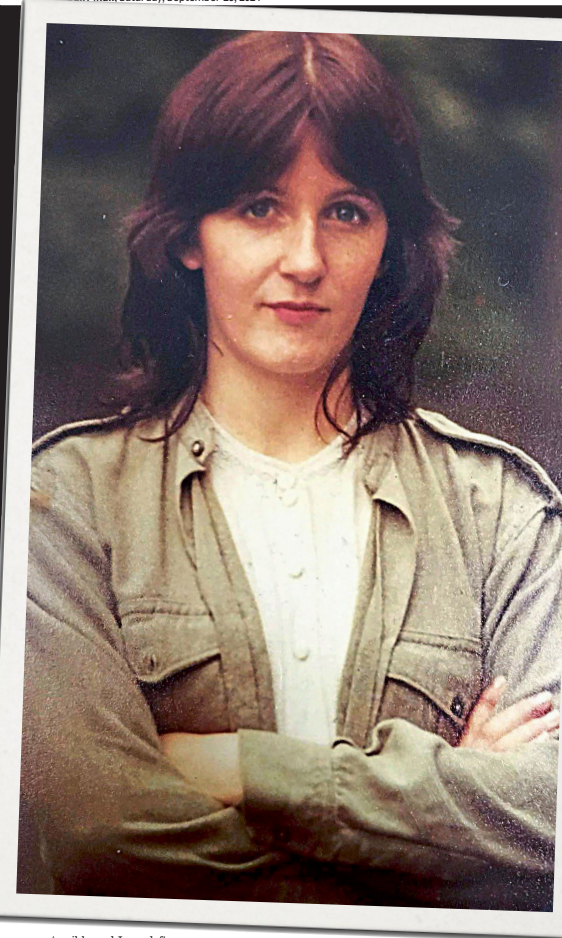
"She was telling me things like, 'You have nothing to offer a child, the child is going to go to a family

with two parents, you can go back and get on with your own life and have your own family some day."

"This woman said to me, 'If you keep your baby you are going to end up in a council estate flat with men calling to you at all hours.' I was 19 and someone was telling me that – to me that is very cruel and manipulative. When you

are in a place like that, you are so far from home. I felt I didn't have a lot of choice, that I had relinquished any right to say anything or do anything. What I tried to do was keep my mouth shut until I got up to the hospital."

"I hadn't been told when the baby was taken out of the hospital. I wasn't told where she was, nothing," she says. "I was crying non-stop and I felt totally helpless. I was taken up to the Mother



Lucky: Caitriona as a teenager and, above, today

"I want to keep her. I want her back."

The very next day we went out and took her home and she was welcomed with open arms."

Caitriona and her partner Gerry are now proud grandparents and Crionna is 44 and a mother herself. Caitriona knows that she was one of the lucky ones.

"It was a miracle, really, that that social worker came into the house. Since then I have met women who have said to me, 'I wish she had walked into my house' because she got my daughter back for me when I thought she was just gone."

Caitriona never spoke about her experiences for 35 years.

"There is a lot of shame attached to it but I went on with my life. I worked as a nurse," she says.

But once the details of what happened in Mother and Baby Homes began to emerge, she

already sold out three nights in Derry and in Belfast's Lyric Theatre, with other dates in Letterkenny, Strabane and Armagh for now. It has been an emotional experience watching her life unfold on stage but Caitriona credits the young cast with doing an excellent job.

Though her daughter Crionna doesn't want to speak publicly, she is fully supportive of her mum.

"When Crionna was older, I told her about it," Caitriona reveals. "She has always been very supportive of me because there is that guilt that I didn't see her for her first three months of her life and I nearly lost her."

"When Oisín was born nine years later, I didn't want to be in the hospital afterwards and I didn't want to let him out of my sight. I didn't understand my own behaviour at the time but afterwards someone said, 'Well of course you were like that because the last time you were in hospital having a baby, your baby was taken away from you.'"

Crionna doesn't mind me using her name but she doesn't want to talk about it because she says she had a very happy childhood and doesn't remember the first three months of her life.

"She has booked to go to the play twice and even my father, who is 92, is coming to see it."

Though Caitriona's story ended with her daughter's return, she knows there are so many other women out there who have not seen their children since the day they gave birth in a cold hospital ward.

"There is a public inquiry going on in the North at the moment and they are taking testimonies from women and their adult children," she says. "I know women who got their children back like me. I know others who made contact in later life but I also know women who are still looking for their children to this day."

Recently at an exhibition called *Sundflowers* that Caitriona and other women who were in Mother and Baby Homes did with Sole Purpose, she met a person from Newry who had no idea Marianvale existed.

"They knew they were born in Newry and adopted but they had no idea that a mother and baby home existed there, so they were going to find out," she says.

"I was one of the lucky ones, I got my daughter back."

■ **FOR ticket details and dates of *The Marian Hotel*, visit solepurpose.org**

I know women who are still looking for their children'

started to talk about her own experience. When she retired from nursing, Caitriona started doing some acting as a hobby.

The women she had met in Marianvale were on her mind as more details of Mother and Baby Homes became public.

"I started thinking about these women all the time," she says. "I know others who made contact in later life but I also know women who are still looking for their children to this day."

The play tells the story of Kitty, a young woman who arrives in a Mother and Baby Home where young women hold each other up with humour in the most heartbreaking circumstances.

"I was trying to write about these women, and I felt a play was the best way to do it," Caitriona says. "I took the scene to a theatre lab and other women, some of whom were experienced playwrights, were so encouraging to me."

Patricia Byrne, the head of Sole Purpose productions, said, "I wrote the play, I'll read it."

"The powerful play has now

was terrible and I was left on my own until the very last minute," Caitriona recalls.

"I was very ill afterwards and I had to get three pints of blood. I was mentally and physically sick."

"A nice nurse sneaked me down to the nursery to see my daughter, but I don't remember leaving the hospital."

"I spent a couple of weeks in Marianvale after that and I don't remember any of that except the day I left."

"Traumatised and bereft, that one day when she had to leave Marianvale without her child is etched in Caitriona's memory."

"I hadn't been told when the baby was taken out of the hospital. I wasn't told where she was, nothing," she says. "I was crying non-stop and I felt totally helpless. I was taken up to the Mother

Superior on the day I was leaving and I just sat and cried and cried. She gave me a pair of rosary beads and told me to get on with my life."

There was no empathy but I realise now she had probably done this hundreds of times."

Caitriona went home to Derry. "I was asking where my daughter was but I hadn't the means to pursue it," she says. "I came home and I went between the sofa and my bed for three months, really ill and desperately upset."

But then, something happened that was nothing short of a miracle. "I was on the sofa feeling depressed when one of my sisters answered the door to a social worker," she says.

"I didn't particularly want to see her because of my experience with the Catholic Adoption social

worker but this young woman walked in and introduced herself as a social worker from the Health Board."

"She said: 'When did you last see your baby?' and I told her it was three months ago when I had got down to see her in the hospital nursery. She then said, 'Would you like to see her?' I couldn't believe it. I sat up and said, 'Of course'."

"She went into the hall and rang the Catholic social worker – they had a row, I heard them arguing on the phone. She came back in and she took me to the foster home."

I saw my daughter Crionna and I was able to hold her. When we got into the car she said, 'What do you want to do?' And I said,