

BRIAN FRIEL (b. 1929)

Dancing at Lughnasa

Friel's first theatre play, *The Enemy Within*, was produced at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, in 1962. Friel was to become virtually the resident playwright at the Abbey. His work was perfectly in tune with the theatre's mission. Yeats wrote that his purpose in founding the Abbey Theatre had been 'to speak the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland. We do not desire propagandist plays, nor plays written to serve some obvious moral purpose; for art seldom concerns itself with those interests or opinions that can be defended by argument, but with the realities of emotion and character that become self-evident when made vivid to the imagination'.

Seamus Deane, the editor of Friel's collected plays, divides them into three categories. *Dancing at Lughnasa* he places in the category of those which are about Ireland, the Irish character and culture, in the tradition of Synge and O'Casey:

The central figures in these plays find themselves torn by the necessity of abandoning the Ireland which they love, even though, or perhaps because, they realize that they must bow to this necessity for the sake of their own integrity as individuals rather than as a consequence of economic or political pressures. Although the different kinds of pressure forcing them to leave their homeland are interconnected, their ultimate perception is that fidelity to the native place is a lethal form of nostalgia, an emotion which must be overcome if they are, quite simply, to grow up. So Friel ... depicts a struggle already well known in other European literatures – the conflict between emotional loyalties to the backward and provincial area and obligations to the sense of self which seeks freedom in a more metropolitan, if shallower, world. The movement of historical forces has set against his provincial Donegal world and it has therefore become anachronistic. In feeling itself to be so, it also becomes susceptible to sentimentality, self-pity, and, in the last stages, to a grotesque caricaturing of what it had once been. For all that, it exercises a charm, a potent spell which the desire for freedom and for the future has tragic difficulty in breaking. [Deane 13]

The 'other European literatures' to which Deane refers clearly relates most directly to Russian literature. Friel said in an interview:

I have done four translations from the Russian — Chekov’s *Three Sisters* and *Uncle Vanya*, and two versions of Turgenev, his play, *A Month in the Country* and a stage version of his novel, *Fathers and Sons*. And over the years I have circled around Gorky and Gogol and Ostrovsky but for some reason haven’t attempted them.

I’m not sure why I find the late nineteenth-century Russians so sympathetic. Maybe because the characters in the plays behave as if their old certainties were as sustaining as ever — even though they know in their hearts that their society is in melt-down and the future has neither a welcome nor even an accommodation for them. Maybe a bit like people of my own generation in Ireland today. Or maybe I find those Russians sympathetic because they have no expectations whatever from love but still invest everything in it. Or maybe they attract me because they seem to expect that their problems will disappear if they talk about them — endlessly.

[Delaney, B. F., *Brian Friel in Conversation*, 2000]

Late one summer’s evening in London in 1987, Brian Friel walked along the Thames Embankment with Tom Kilroy. The two playwrights had just left the National Theatre, where they had seen Friel’s dramatization of Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons*. As they passed homeless men and women curled up in doorways and trash-filled alleys, the writers speculated about the lives of these unfortunate people. Friel said he had two maiden aunts who ended up like that – destitute and abandoned in London. Just before World War II they had suddenly left the family home in the tiny village of Glenties in Donegal, and never returned. Caught up by the story, Kilroy suggested Friel write a play about it.

Dancing at Lughnasa is loosely based on the lives of Friel’s mother and aunts who lived in Glenties, on the west coast of Donegal. Though it never loses its focus on the ‘five brave women’ to whom it is dedicated, it is by no means wholly autobiographical. The three main departures from fact are first, that Friel was not a ‘love-child’; second, that his uncle, though he was indeed a missionary priest in Africa, never ‘went native’; and third, the festival of Lughnasa, (though as recently as 1962 a researcher located 195 sites in Ireland where Lughnasa was still being observed), was already forgotten by the inhabitants of Glenties in the thirties. These three fictional additions transform the play, universalizing it in ways that we shall see.

At the beginning of his career Friel had told the *Belfast Telegraph* that his ambition was to write ‘the great Irish play’, which he defined as ‘one where the author can talk so truthfully and accurately about people in his own neighbourhood and make it so that those folk could be living in Omagh, Omaha or Omansk’.

Set in 1936, during the summer before de Valera's new constitution was approved by referendum, the play depicts the late summer days when love briefly seems possible for two of the Mundy sisters (Chris and Rose) and the family welcomes home the frail elder brother, who has returned from a life as missionary in Africa. However, as the summer ends, the play foresees the sadness and economic privations under which the family will suffer as all hopes fade.

The date is important in many ways. The characters are in the process of losing hold of their identities. Their upbringing as Irish Catholics from the far north almost ensures self-doubt. History is turning them into anachronisms. They find it hard to be themselves, since they can find no basis, no community outside the family, to validate any selfhood beyond the stereotype of the suffering Irish peasant-woman. Economic pressures leave them at the mercy of forces they cannot resist. There is the dead hand of the past, represented by the church, which rejects Father Jack and deprives Kate, the family breadwinner, of her job at the whim of the priest. And there is the equally irresistible pressure of the future in the form of industrialization, which has at last reached Donegal, destroying cottage industries and forcing the rural poor into the cities for work.

Helen Lojek (in the *Cambridge Companion to Brian Friel*, 2006) speaks of ‘The unkept promises of a revolution’:

The Republic’s 1937 Constitution famously incorporated not only the tenets of conservative Catholicism, but also a romantic vision of Irish woman, a term that clearly meant “wife and mother”: her “life” (not her work) within the home “gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.” Such legislative paternalism restricted women’s roles outside the home and granted them less than equal citizenry.

Women teachers were paid less than men, and were obliged to retire if they married. They could be sacked for any reason on the say-so of the local priest.

The complicity of the oldest sister, Kate, in upholding patriarchal precepts emphasizes the complexity of gender issues. Kate may uphold those precepts partly out of concern for her job as a teacher, but she assumes authority on the basis of her income and dismisses the value of unpaid household work, just as the 1937 Constitution was to do.

Agnes says to Kate:

I wash every stitch of clothes you wear. I polish your shoes. I make your bed. We both do – Rose and I. Paint the house. Sweep the chimney. Cut the grass. Save the turf. What you have here, Kate, are two unpaid servants.

In Donegal there were few men to work the land or fertilize the women. The men were free, as the women were not, to go off alone to seek a better life in the cities or England or America. Of those who remained, a high proportion were bled off into the priesthood. Young men were so scarce that in Donegal the first prize in an annual contest for the best male dancer was his choice of a bride from all the female contestants.

Chrissie has had a man, but he has abandoned her and their child, except for brief occasional visits. It is only at the end of the play that we learn (and Chrissie never learns) that he has a wife and children in Wales. Their brother has been away for twenty-five years as a missionary priest in Africa. The five sisters have no life beyond each other. They subsist in a time-warp. Though it is 1936, modernity is only now impinging on their lives in the form of radios, gramophones, motor-cycles, and, more ominously, factories.

The surviving pagan festival of Lughnasa alone has offered them an annual release, if only in imagination, from the constraints of puritanical village Catholicism. But their world is now opening up. They have acquired their first radio, which, because it brings not only news of a wider, freer world, but wild dance music (both ceili and Cole Porter) into their own home, they call Lugh, until Kate, the most conservative sister, insists that they call it by the brand name it bears, Marconi. Kate is also shocked by stories of bonfires, heavy drinking, sexual activities and even animal sacrifice during the Lughansa rituals in the back hills. Brother Jack comes home with his stories of even more blatantly pagan rituals in Africa, which

he narrates with, for Kate, a deeply shocking enthusiasm. Gerry arrives on a motorbike, a shining token of modern mobility, with tales of life in the big city.

Dancing at Lughnasa is Friel's bleakest, but also his warmest play. The play does not shy away from sentiment for fear of the false or exaggerated sentiment which is sentimentality. There is too much gritty realism and self-deprecating comedy for sentimentality, which is also distanced by the narrator's admission that his account, remembering what he saw when he was seven, and after a gap of half a century, is not wholly trustworthy. The whole play is what Francis Fergusson, speaking of *The Cherry Orchard*, called 'a theatre-poem of the suffering of change'. But the narrator's selective memory imparts a warm glow, and stops the action before that suffering finally breaks the family. Only in the narrator's epilogue, with hindsight, are the bleak facts revealed. Seamus Heaney has written:

Friel's plays ultimately recognize this modern solitude of the person within the universe... Memory and its transformations are sometimes the guide, sometimes the misguider... False memory sends the quester into the kind of self-deception, into the limbo of meaningless invention, but true memory gives access to the dancing place. [‘For liberation: Brian Friel and the use of memory’, in Peacock ed. *The Achievement of Brian Friel*. P..240]

Lughnasa was a harvest festival every August in honour of the pagan god Lugh, once celebrated throughout Ireland and in parts of Great Britain and France. As recently as 1962 Máire MacNeill found the festival surviving in 195 sites in Ireland. It was usually celebrated on hill-tops well away from the towns. The sacrifice of animals disappeared early from the festivals in Ireland. The festival included the ceremonial reaping of the first sheaf of wheat, and the gathering of bilberries; but its main feature was dancing. Friel has described *Dancing at Lughnasa* as being about 'the necessity for paganism'. Dancing is thus associated with the celebration of fertility, exactly what is most conspicuously missing from the lives of the Mundy sisters.

The house is two miles outside Ballybeg (Friel's fictitious name taken from the Gaelic for small town). Its uncultivated garden occupies nearly half the stage. One of the branches of a large sycamore 'reaches over part of the house'. Thus the house is at the frontier between the natural world and the

world of the rules and order of a strictly Catholic, conservative, repressive and patriarchal society.

Not only does Lughnasa strongly resemble the fertility ceremonies Jack describes in Uganda; it equally strongly resembles the rites of Dionysos in ancient Greece, the rites Dionysos himself in *The Bacchae* calls ‘my Bacchic revels’. The Bacchae were the full-time female followers of Dionysos, but they were joined at certain festivals by all the women of the city (virtually a servant class), who headed for the hills, outside the jurisdiction of the civic authorities, where they sacrificed animals, drank the juice of the grape and participated in frenzied dancing. The authorities disapproved, and tried on several occasions to ban the rites, but without success. The Lughnasa bilberries are the equivalent of the grapes of Dionysos.

Similarly, the efforts of the church to abolish or at least Christianize Lughnasa, as they had Christianized the festivals of the spring equinox (Easter) and the winter solstice (Christmas) were never wholly successful. ‘In 1935 the Public Dance Halls Act had been passed, largely in response to complaints by the clergy that unregulated dancing was lewd and immoral’ [Lojek]. This act aimed to eliminate outdoor dances, and keep all dancing in licenced halls under the supervision of the clergy. In the thirties live music was replaced by gramophone and radio music, and imported music replaced ceili music. So people no longer needed a dance hall. Dancing once again escaped the regulators. John Lahr has described dancing as an alternative to religion: ‘Dancing expresses the will to integrate with life. ... It kills time and incarnates grace’.

Tyrone Guthrie, who had a deep effect on Friel, wrote:

The theatre makes its effect not by means of illusion, but by ritual. The theatre is the direct descendent of fertility rites, war dances, and all the corporate, ritual expressions by means of which our primitive ancestors, often wiser than we, sought to relate themselves to God, or the gods.

[*A Life in the Theatre*, London, Hamish Hamilton 1961, 313-4]

Ritual usually consists of words plus images plus music plus dance. Thus the whole of *Dancing at Lughnasa* is ritual.

Friel's sense of the positioning and relative movements of the characters on stage, the choreography, is either stated in great detail in the stage directions or implied by the dialogue to such an extent that the director has little scope but to interpret Friel's conception accurately. Patrick Mason, the director of the first production of the play has written:

He also has this extraordinary capacity, which is very demanding, to nuance a line quite perfectly. ... And these nuances are extremely fine, strangely accurate inflections of emotion and character which are carried in the syntax and vocabulary of a line, in the rhythm of a line, in the placing of a line. ... The main thing is that one line provokes the next. ... If you inflect the line slightly wrong it will not provoke the next. Therefore the music of the language is extremely precise and I think that is one of the most demanding aspects, this acuteness of ear to the poise of his language.

There is the most extraordinary stage direction. ... He lists in detail the order in which the women dance and he does so because he knows their characters. His calculation is that this character will dance in this place at that time because of who she is. And he will also list in reverse order when the music cuts out, those who will drop out of the dance first, and those whose impetus will carry them beyond the music. ... In other words, language and gesture are all there to carry character, and all rooted in character. And therefore another challenge to the director is to be as acutely aware of the character, the characteristics, as the playwright is. [Delaney]

Each character can legitimately feel that the whole play is about her or him. Catherine Byrne recalled:

I was playing Chrissie, mother of the little boy Michael, and Patrick asked me 'Catherine, what's this play all about?' I was really naïve, and I said 'It's all about this woman and her little boy'. And everyone laughed around the table! I was so focused on myself, I thought the whole play was about Chrissie and Michael. And then we went for a cup of tea and Brian came up to me and said 'you're quite right, this is what it's all about'. [Delaney]

Rosaline Linehan played Kate in the National Theatre production in 1990:

It would be easy for a production to sentimentalize Friel, just as it is easy to sentimentalize Chehov. With both writers this is often a matter of missing their comedy. ... Love, music and comedy. And it's very important to Brian that you get all his laughs as much as you twist everybody's heart. One doesn't happen without the other. You've got to have them in place. The plays are full of comedy, wild comedy. ... But I come back again to the most important thing – the music [meaning the music of the dialogue]. At your peril do you move off it. It's like orchestration – there's duets, there's trios, there's quintets, there's solos, and each of these has to be taken on that level and each of these has to be as cleanly, as unselfishly really, as possible.

[Delaney]

Friel's dialogue is crafted specifically for the theatre:

The tools that are available to the playwright to tell his story are few enough — words, action, silence. In the theatre that has engaged me words are at the very core of it all. The same words that are available to the novelist, to the poet; and used with the same precision, and with the same scrupulous attention not only to the exact kernel meaning but to all those allusive meanings that every word hoards. But there is a difference. The playwright's words aren't written for solitary engagement — they are written for public utterance. They are used as the story-teller uses them, to hold an audience in his embrace and within that vocal sound. So unlike the words of the novelist or poet, the playwright's words are scored in altogether different keys and in altogether different tempi. And it is with this score that the playwright and the actor privately plot to work their public spell.

But even though these written words aren't fully empowered until an actor liberates them and fulfils them, when that happens — if the playwright is in full mastery of his craft — then that theatrical language acquires its own special joy and delight; because what is written to be sung is now being sung.

[Delaney]

