



OLD VIC
NEW VOICES

DANCING AT LUGHNASA BY BRIAN FRIEL

TEACHERS' RESOURCE PACK
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MITCHELL MORENO, EXCEPT
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DANCING AT LUGHNASA AT THE OLD VIC

The Old Vic, Sonia Friedman Productions & Tulchin/Bartner present

Cast in alphabetical order

Chris	Andrea Corr
Maggie	Niamh Cusack
Kate	Michelle Fairley
Rose	Simone Kirby
Jack	Finbar Lynch
Agnes	Susan Lynch
Michael	Peter McDonald
Gerry	Jo Stone-Fewings

Understudies

Rose/Chris/Agnes	Alison Baker
Kate/Maggie	Angela McGowan
Gerry/Michael/Jack	Tom Peters

Creative team

Director	Anna Mackmin
Designer	Lez Brotherston
Lighting	Paule Constable
Choreographer	Scarlett Mackmin
Sound	Gareth Fry
Casting	Toby Whale CDG

Act 1 A warm day in early August, 1936

Act 2 Three weeks later. The home of the Mundy family, two mile outside the village of Ballybeg, County Donegal, Ireland.

Approximate running time 2 hours 20 minutes including interval

First performance at The Old Vic, Thursday 26 February 2009

Last performance at The Old Vic, Saturday 9 May 2009

MAKING SENSE IN THE MELTDOWN THE THEATRICAL ACHIEVEMENT OF BRIAN FRIEL

BY FINTAN O'TOOLE, COLUMNIST AND DRAMA CRITIC
FOR THE IRISH TIMES

Something Friel wrote in 1999 about his translations of Chekhov and Turgenev gets close to his own sense of where he stands in relation to Irish society. He has been attracted to the 19th century Russian authors, he explained, '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 meltdown 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.'

That last line, typically qualified with the little 'maybe' that makes it seem like a throwaway remark, is both poignant and noble. It points to the richly ambiguous relationship of Friel's achievement to the Ireland of his times. The great gesture of his work has been to carry on as if the world from which he takes his artistic bearings were not in meltdown, even while the work itself enacts that very implosion.

It has always seemed to me that a good way to place Friel is to ignore his own rather dismissive attitude to the short stories he wrote in the 1950s and early 1960s, and to go and read them. The shocking thing about them is how very good they are, how controlled and poised. They are the work of a young and successful author (Friel had a contract with the *New Yorker*) who is clearly in the process of becoming a great prose writer.

His decision to stop writing prose and start writing plays reflected, surely, a much wider loss of faith in the traditional narrative. There may have been all sorts of reasons for this, but it is worth remembering that it was part of a much broader European cultural shift in which, in the aftermath of the mid-century catastrophes, narrative itself came to be seen as, at best inadequate, at worst a lie. Theatre, with its looser forms and ability to supplement or contradict words with sounds, gestures and physical images, offered the hope of restoring some authority to the act of telling stories.

What's fascinating, though, is that for Friel those hopes were largely dashed. What he found was that the matter of Ireland which fed his imagination actually challenged the basic building blocks of theatrical narrative. The materials of theatre are space, time, language, story and character. All of them, in Friel, collapse in the 'meltdown' that each of his plays enacts.

Space does not cohere because of emigration (the great early theme of Friel's plays) and because of the displaced status of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland to which he belongs. Time, whose theatrical manifestation is memory, refuses to function. Gar O'Donnell in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* remembers things that never happened; the unreliable and contradictory narratives of the same events in *Faith Healer* enact the slipperiness of the past.

Language, the concern of plays like *Translations* and *The Communication Cord*, proves inadequate to communication. Stories, and those who write them (Lombard in *Making History*, for example) don't reflect reality, they invent it. And even characters do not cohere: Gar is split on stage into private and public selves, Michael in *Dancing at Lughnasa* into past and present selves.

Friel's genius, though, has been to make art of these very failures, inadequacies and incoherencies. He has done this partly by dint of his extraordinary gift for language and structure; he smuggled the short story back into his theatre and made it strange and haunting. But partly, too, by having the guts to embrace the liberation implicit in knowing that things don't make sense but doing them anyway.

He has been able, like those Russian characters, to 'behave as if the old certainties' of language, story and character 'were as sustaining as ever'. The miraculous thing is that they have indeed been sustaining, not just for him, but for us. Because of that, his pessimism is surely unjustified. The world of his past may have melted down, but the future will have a welcome, or at least an accommodation, for a writer who taught us, in the words of Hugh in *Translations*, that 'confusion is not an ignoble condition'.

This is a shortened version of an article that appeared in The Irish Times to mark Brian Friel's 80th birthday.

CHRONOLOGY THE PLAYS OF BRIAN FRIEL AND THE IRISH ISLAND CONTEXT

1919

Beginning of the Irish War of Independence, a guerilla war against the British Government in Ireland by the Army of the Irish Republic (the 'Old IRA').

1920

The Government of Ireland Act separates the island into Northern Ireland, based on six north-east counties, and Southern Ireland, based on the remaining 26 counties.

1921

Irish and British governments call a truce to the war and sign the Anglo-Irish Treaty. The Irish Free State is created.

1922

Beginning of the Irish Civil War between anti-Treaty and pro-Treaty supporters.

1923

IRA orders volunteers to dump arms, effectively ending the Irish Civil War.

1929

Brian Friel born near Omagh, County Tyrone.

1932

Eamon de Valera's Fianna Fáil party wins the general election.

1936

Year in which *Dancing at Lughnasa* is set.

Irish volunteers go to Spain to fight on both sides of the Spanish Civil War.

1937

The Constitution of Ireland is approved in a referendum. It replaces the Irish Free State with a new state called Éire (or Ireland in English).

1939

Friel family moves to Derry.

1948

Brian Friel graduates from Saint Patrick's College, Maynooth.

1948

The Republic of Ireland Act abolishes the remaining roles of the British monarch in the government of the Irish state.

The British Government refuses a request to change Northern Ireland's name to Ulster.

1949

The state is formally declared the Republic of Ireland and leaves the British Commonwealth.

1950

Friel begins teaching in Derry (Londonderry), Northern Ireland.

1951

Friel has his first short story published in *The Bell*.

1954

Friel marries Anne Morrison.

1958

Friel's radio plays *A Sort of Freedom* and *To This Hard House* produced by BBC Belfast.

1959

Friel begins regularly contributing short stories to the *New Yorker*.

1960

The Doubtful Paradise (Ulster Group Theatre, Belfast)*.

Friel retires from teaching to concentrate on full-time writing.

1962

The Enemy Within (Abbey, Dublin).

Friel's first collection of short stories published, *The Saucer of Larks*.

1963

Friel spends six months with Tyrone Guthrie at his theatre in Minneapolis.

1964

Philadelphia, Here I Come! (Gaiety, Dublin).

The new Abbey Theatre opens in Dublin.

1966

The Loves of Cass Maguire (Helen Hayes, New York).

Second collection of short stories published, *The Gold in the Sea*.

1968

Lovers (Gate, Dublin).

1968

Crystal and Fox (Gaiety, Dublin).

Civil Rights protest marches in Northern Ireland.

1969

The Mundy Scheme (Olympia, Dublin).

Friel and his family move to the Inishowen peninsula, County Donegal.

1971

The Gentle Island (Olympia, Dublin).

Internment without trial is introduced in Northern Ireland. Violent protests follow, in which 17 people are killed.

1972

14 people die during the Bloody Sunday marches in Derry.

The Northern Ireland Government is suspended and direct rule imposed from Westminster.

1973

The Freedom of the City (Royal Court, London).

1974

The Prevention of Terrorism Act is brought in as a response to increasing IRA bombing activity.

1975

Volunteers (Abbey, Dublin).

1977

Living Quarters (Abbey, Dublin).

1979

Aristocrats (Abbey, Dublin).

Faith Healer (Longacre, New York).

1980

Translations (Guildhall, Derry).

Friel forms The Field Day theatre company with the actor Stephen Rea.

1981

Bobby Sands and nine other men die in hunger strikes at the Maze and Armagh prisons.

1981

Three Sisters (after Chekhov; Guildhall, Derry).

1982

The Communication Chord (Guildhall, Derry).

1987

Friel is appointed to the Irish Senate, where he serves for two years.

Fathers and Sons (after Turgenev; Lyttelton, London).

1988

Making History (Guildhall, Derry).

1990

Dancing at Lughnasa (Abbey, Dublin).

1991

Dancing at Lughnasa opens on Broadway.

The London Vertigo (after Charles Macklin; Andrew's Lane, Dublin).

1992

Dancing at Lughnasa receives eight Tony nominations and wins three, including Best Play.

A Month in the Country (after Turgenev; Gate, Dublin).

1993

Wonderful Tennessee (Abbey, Dublin).

1994

Molly Sweeney (Gate, Dublin).

Friel resigns from Field Day.

Following the Downing Street Declaration stating that Northern Ireland should be free to decide its own future, the IRA and Loyalist paramilitaries both announce cease fires.

1997

Give Me Your Answer, Do! (Abbey, Dublin).

1998

Uncle Vanya (after Chekhov; Gate, Dublin).

Release of a film version of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, with screenplay by Frank McGuinness.

The Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement is negotiated and endorsed in referendums.

1999

Friel receives a Lifetime Achievement Arts Award on the occasion of his 70th birthday.

The Friel Festival of eight plays takes place.

2001

The Yalta Game (Gate, Dublin).

2002

Two Plays After, consisting of *The Bear* and *Afterplay* (Gate, Dublin).

2003

Performances (Gate, Dublin).

2005

The Home Place (Gate, Dublin).

2008

Hedda Gabler (after Ibsen; Gate, Dublin).

DANCING AT LUGHNASA

A SYNOPSIS

Act 1

It is August, 1936. Seven year-old Michael lives with his mother Christina and her four sisters – Kate, Maggie, Agnes and Rose – in a humble cottage just outside the village of Ballybeg in County Donegal.

Michael's uncle Jack has returned to Ireland having spent 25 years working in the village of Ryanga, Uganda, as a missionary in a leper colony. Though only 53, Jack is in poor health and suffering from memory loss as a result of malaria.

The play opens with Michael making kites in the garden and Maggie, Agnes, Rose and Chris working in the kitchen. The sisters sing, dance, and joke as they perform various household chores and knit gloves. Rose, who has a learning disability, talks about Danny Bradley, a married man who has given her a trinket and whom she loves, but her sisters are worried that he wants to take advantage of her.

The eldest sister Kate returns home from shopping for provisions in Ballybeg. She is a school teacher, and the only wage-earner of the family. Kate reports that in Ballybeg everyone is very excited about the forthcoming harvest dance. Her sisters beg to be allowed to go, but Kate forbids it as she thinks that as unmarried middle-aged women they'd be seen as a laughing stock.

Kate has brought back a battery for the radio set which the sisters have recently acquired. Maggie begins to move to the céilí music on the radio, and one by one the other sisters join in until they are all dancing with wild abandon.

Gerry Evans, Michael's father, unexpectedly arrives at the house to see Chris after an absence of over a year. Gerry tells her that he's planning to go to Spain to fight in the civil war with the International Brigade. The temperamental radio starts up of its own accord, and before he leaves Gerry dances Chris down the lane, watched by Michael from behind a bush.

Jack talks about his time in Ryanga, and steps out into the garden where he performs a strange ritual dance, accompanying himself with a rhythm beat out on two sticks.

Act 2

It's now early September, three weeks after the date of Act 1. Michael is writing a letter to Santa asking for a bell for the bicycle which he believes his father is going to buy him.

Jack's health is getting better, and his English vocabulary is coming back to him. To Kate's alarm, it becomes clear that even though he was a Catholic missionary in Uganda, he embraced local pagan customs such as animal sacrifice, ritual ceremonies, and the use of medicine men.

Gerry visits again to say goodbye before leaving for Spain, and is recruited into climbing the sycamore tree to mend the radio aerial. In Ballybeg, Chris has bumped into the knitting agent, who tells her that she'll no longer be able to buy gloves from Agnes and Rose since a new knitting factory has opened in Donegal Town.

Agnes returns from gathering bilberries, expecting to find Rose back at the house. Agnes left her by the quarry three hours ago, but Rose still hasn't returned home. Worried for her safety, the sisters are about to go and search for Rose when she arrives home, after having spent the afternoon with Danny Bradley up in the back hills, where at this time of year ancient pagan Lughnasa rituals are practiced.

As the sisters prepare for dinner, Jack changes into his old army chaplain uniform, and he and Gerry act out a Ryangan exchange ceremony in which they swap hats. Then Gerry admires the kites that Michael has made, decorated with fierce primitive faces.

We learn what happened to the characters beyond the point where the play ends. Jack never returned to Ryanga, but died of a heart attack a year later. Agnes and Rose left the cottage and went to London, where they died in abject poverty. Gerry returned from Spain wounded, and for a few years occasionally visited Ballybeg, until war broke out. He died with his "other" family – a wife and three children – in Wales. Kate lost her post as a school teacher and was unemployed for several years before getting a job as a private tutor. And Chris, Michael's mother, spent the rest of her life working unhappily in the knitting factory in Donegal Town.

1930S IRELAND A DECADE OF CHANGE

'THE WHOLE THING IS SO FRAGILE IT CAN'T BE HELD TOGETHER MUCH LONGER. IT'S ALL ABOUT TO COLLAPSE.' KATE MUNDY

It was no coincidence that when *Dancing at Lughnasa* opened on the main stage of the Abbey Theatre Dublin in 1990, Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* was playing in the theatre's studio space next door.

Directed by Brian Friel's daughter Judy, this production of *The Glass Menagerie* had been programmed as a companion piece for *Dancing at Lughnasa*, since both plays share similar structural and thematic concerns.

Each takes the form of a memory play, told from the point of view of a narrator who was once part of the narrow world he describes, but who has since escaped. And each play is set in 1936, a time of peace for Ireland and America, yet one that was poised on the cusp of great change. Referring to 1936, Tennessee Williams wrote:

'Adventure and change were imminent in this year. They were waiting around the corner for all these kids. Suspended in the mist over Berchtesgaden [the Nazi's mountain retreat], caught in the folds of Chamberlain's umbrella. In Spain there was Guernica. But here there was only hot swing music and liquor.'

This description could just as easily apply to the Mundy sisters in County Donegal as to Williams' Wingfield family in St Louis. With references to Abyssinia and Gerry's joining the International Brigade, Friel points to the troubles brewing abroad, while at home the sisters' energies are focused on domestic matters and the output of the temperamental new radio.

The Radio

In Michael's memory, the arrival of the family's first ever wireless set and the homecoming of Father Jack are inextricably linked: the shock at Jack's shrunken appearance is tempered by the awe and delight at the 'sheer magic' of the radio.

Radio was not just a new experience for the Mundy household – it was a relatively new experience for Ireland. Though broadcasting from Dublin began in 1926, most Irish people were unable to receive the weak 1.5 kilowatt signal. It was not until a high-powered transmitter was built in Athlone in 1932 that Radio Athlone (Radio Áth Luain in Irish) could be received across the whole country.

Yet even though the signal was now in everyone's reach, owning a set was not. In *Sketches of Donegal* Sean Dorman observes that even as late as 1944, radios were rare in parts of the county:

'For a time I allowed my radio to continue playing, assuming that it would have the interest of a novelty. There are many wireless sets in the Donegal highlands, but not in the valley of Graneen where the people are too poor to afford them, and whenever I passed any of them, working in a field or on a turf stack, I would be asked for the latest news about the war.'

The arrival of the costly and uncommon Marconi is, then, a major event for the Mundys, bringing new voices, ideas and music into their lives. As might be expected from the national broadcaster of a post-independence Ireland, traditional Irish dance music and céilí forms a part of the programming.

But the radio also broadcasts an assortment of international songs: 'The Isle of Capri' made famous by Gracie Fields; the American big band number 'Dancing in the Dark'; Cole Porter's 'Anything Goes'.

As Brian Friel noted:

'It's music from a different culture that liberates [the Mundy sisters]. They haven't absorbed it into their life and into their culture and tamed it. It's still slightly exotic.'

In the exotic lies intrigue, but also threat. When the radio first arrives, Maggie jokingly attempts to recognise its power and magic by naming it Lugh, after the pagan god of harvest. Kate, the voice of Catholic rectitude in the household, forbids the plan, saying that it is 'sinful to christen an inanimate object with any kind of name, not to talk of a pagan god'.

Later, when the radio has (again) stopped working, she exclaims 'Peace, thanks be to God! D'you know what that thing has done? Killed all Christian conversation in this country.' The radio comes to symbolise the threat of paganism to Irish Catholic values, a central concern of the play.

Pagan and Christian

Just as the radio is a partly foreign and potentially corrupting influence in the Mundy cottage, so the homecoming of Father Jack brings with it alien and challenging ideas and behaviour.

Jack, for years a source of great pride as Ballybeg's 'own leper priest', has transgressed his role in Ryanga and 'gone native'. He has come to accept and even embrace the traditional rituals and way of life which seem to work well for the Ryangan villagers. And within this acceptance is an implicit critique of the Catholic missionary model, an understanding that it would fail to meet the spiritual and emotional needs of the community of lepers.

Elsewhere too Friel is interested in the failure of institutional Christianity to be a force for good in the lives of its followers. So for example In *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, Private Gar confronts Canon O'Boyle with a scathing attack on his spiritual impotence:

'You could translate all this loneliness, this groping, this dreadful bloody buffoonery into Christian terms that will make life bearable for us all. And yet you don't say a word. Why, Canon? Why, arid Canon? Isn't this your job; to translate?'

In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Kate comes to reconcile her strict Catholic beliefs with her brother's behaviour by classifying it as 'his own distinctive search'. The rest of the community, however, is less forgiving. The local priest, who is also Kate's employer, sacks her from her job as schoolteacher, ostensibly because of falling class sizes, but in reality as a punishment for Jack's renegade behaviour. In doing so he plunges the entire Mundy household into deepening poverty.

Father Jack's Ugandan experiences are not the only source of paganism in the play. At Lughnasa time, the back hill locals of Ballybeg practice a ceremony involving dancing, fire, and animal sacrifice, just like Jack's African rituals.

Maire MacNeill's book *The Festival of Lughnasa* explores Celtic and pre-Christian harvest rituals and how they continued in Ireland into modern times (see page 13 of this pack). While there is no evidence of goat sacrifice in the 20th century – as Rose dramatically describes – the practice of large groups gathered to sing and dance on hilltops is well documented.

Yet in the 1920s and 30s – the early years of the new Irish Free State – even such seemingly innocent and traditionally Celtic activities came to be frowned upon by an increasingly conservative church and state, and would not long survive into the century.

In the National Folklore Collection at University College Dublin there is a remarkable collection of manuscripts from County Galway, part of a large scale project in 1937 and 1938 in which hundreds of school children wrote down the oral stories and remembrances of neighbours and relatives.

The accounts in the archive paint a picture of an entirely different world from the one we now know, a world where woollen charms were used to heal the sick and where lepreacháns could be tricked into giving up gold.

In one essay, a boy records the story of a local witch. When the priest rode out to her house to urge her to renounce her dark arts, she refused, and so he gave her a 'merciless flogging'. On leaving her house he found his horse dead. Knowing it was the fault of her magic, he went back inside and tried to strike a deal with her: if she would revive his horse, he would leave her in peace. She did so, and the priest never bothered her again.

Christianity is strongly present in these stories, but sometimes sits alongside or is seen in conflict with traditional Celtic or pagan ways.

The archive records the final decades of the old way of life in rural Ireland, before technology and industrialisation would change things forever.

Industrialisation

The industrial revolution came late to Ireland. In the first phase of the revolution, beginning in England in the mid-1700s, the reason was logical: there was a scarcity of the necessary raw materials. The coal, iron, and other minerals required for fuel and manufacturing could be found in abundance in the North and Midlands of England and the lowlands of Scotland, but were not readily available in Ireland.

By the end of the 19th century, however, advances in commercial shipping and the creation of an Irish rail network offered the possibility of freeing up this direct dependency between the local availability of minerals and industrial production. Yet still almost the entire country remained agricultural.

The reasons for this lay in the part Ireland played in the larger economy of Britain. With huge portions of Irish land owned by English landlords, agriculture was a profitable business and an important source of imported food for mainland Britain. It was only Ulster – geographically well placed for links with Liverpool and Glasgow – that developed industries in shipyards and linen manufacturing.

In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the opening of the knitting factory in Donegal Town doesn't occur until 1936; almost 200 years after the birth of similar factories in England.

In 1930s Ireland, improvements in energy technology and in the transportation of materials and goods were making the rural industrialisation of the country easier. But there was also a bigger political picture behind the developments. It was only after independence in 1922 that Ireland could begin a process of de-specialisation, actively embracing the change from an essentially agricultural focus to a more diverse capitalist economy.

Attendant on change is loss, and in *Dancing at Lughnasa* this is poignantly charted by the collapse of the cottage knitting industry that had provided a living – albeit a meagre one – for Agnes and Rose.

Summary

The opening of the textile factory in the play forms part of a complex of events which portray the Mundy's world at a moment of seismic change, a tipping point where the old is about to break irrevocably into the new.

At its broadest level, the play points to changes occurring across the whole of Europe: references to Mussolini and the Spanish Civil war highlight the rise of fascist dictatorships and the brewing clouds of the Second World War.

At home in Ireland, Maggie's parodic ditty 'Will you vote for De Valera, will you vote?' reminds us that Eamon De Valera's Fianna Fáil party will be up for re-election in 1937, and that the country is on the point of ratifying its new Constitution – criticised by feminists and liberals for its restrictive articles on the role of women, the family and divorce.

In 1936, the political revolution of Irish independence has for the time being been won, and the conservative, Catholic-dominated social revolution will allow no room for heretical pagan beliefs or practices. Even social dancing falls under the moralistic thumb of clergy and state legislators (see page 11 in this pack).

The industrial revolution in the young Free State is just beginning, part of a wider insinuation of new technologies, as witnessed in the play: the knitting factory in Donegal, the cinema Rose loves, the car that Gerry arrives in, and the gramophones he sells.

But it is the radio which is the most potent symbol of change in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. With its mix of the traditionally Irish and the exotically international, the old and the new, its music is for the Mundy sisters both a source of liberation and a portent of massive change ahead.

A BOOM OF BOOTS ON STONE PERSPECTIVES ON PUBLIC DANCING

Anxiety about the corrupting nature of public dances preoccupied the Irish clergy in the 1920s and 30s. Perceived as a catalyst for immoral behaviour, and often credited with the increase in illegitimate births, Catholic bishops pressed for the strict regulation of dances as a matter of national urgency.

The Public Dance Halls Act was passed by the Irish Government in 1935, requiring the licensing of all dancing venues and effectively bringing to an end the custom of crossroads (outdoor) and night dances.

The creation of the Act was an indication of the Church's significant influence on Irish policy making, and a sign that the new nation would be distinguished less by its Celtic traditions than by its conservative Roman Catholicism.

The following three accounts provide different perspectives on public dancing in Ireland in the 1920s and 1930s.

Dal gCais (extract)

by Junior Crehan, 1977

The way of life at Markham's Cross and the country house dance was rooted in our traditions and culture. But this way of life was ended in the mid-1930s by a number of events; and while it is hard to say that it would have continued in the same way for much longer, it is safe to say that its end was quickened by those who, for different reasons, wanted to put an end to it.

In 1934 both Church and Government dealt a severe blow to country life. For a long time the Church had been against the country-house dance. They put forward many reasons for their attitude. They claimed that the house dances were places of mis-conduct, that there were no proper sanitary conditions and they seemed to be fearing greatly for our morals.

In 1934 [sic] the Dance Hall Act was passed. The Act banned the house dances and anybody holding such a dance after this was brought to Court and fined. The Dance Hall Act had closed our schools of tradition and left us a poorer people. In addition to this, in the 1940s, the rate of emigration increased rapidly. The youth saw nothing in their own country but poverty, and Government and Church collected their Dance-Hall dues from a falling population. The countryside was once more going through that terrible silence which it had suffered after the Famine, the silence of a departing people and a dying of music and song.

The Evils of Dancing (extract)

Statement of the Archbishops and Bishops of Ireland issued at their Meeting in Maynooth on 6 October, 1925

We have a word of entreaty, advice and instruction, to speak to our flocks on a very grave subject. There is danger of losing the name which the chivalrous honour of Irish boys and the Christian reserve of Irish maidens had won for Ireland. If our people part with the character that gave rise to that name, we lose with it much of our national strength, and still more of the high rank we have held in the Kingdom of Christ.

Purity is strength, and purity and faith go together. Both virtues are in danger these times, but purity is more directly assailed than faith. The danger comes from pictures and papers and drink. It comes more from the keeping of improper company than from any other cause; and there is no worse fomenter of this great evil than the dancing hall.

We know too well the fruits of these halls all over the country. It is nothing new, alas, to find Irish girls now and then brought to shame, and retiring to the refuge of institutions or the dens of great cities. But dancing halls, more especially, in the general uncontrol of recent years have deplorably aggravated the ruin of virtue due to ordinary human weakness. They have brought many a good, innocent girl into sin, shame and scandal, and set her unwary feet on the road that leads to perdition.

Given a few frivolous young people in a locality and a few careless parents, and the agents of the wicked one will come there to do the rest, once a dance is announced without proper control. They may lower or destroy the moral tone of the whole countryside.

Amusement is legitimate, though some of our people are overgiven to play. What, however, we condemn is sin and the dangerous occasions of sin. Wherever these exist, amusement is not legitimate. It does not deserve the name of amusement among Christians. It is the sport of the evil spirit for those who have no true self-respect.

To say nothing of the special danger of drink, imported dances of an evil kind, the surroundings of the dancing hall, withdrawal from the hall for intervals, and the dark ways home have been the destruction of virtue in every part of Ireland.

It is no small commendation of Irish dances that they cannot be danced for long hours. That, however, is not their chief merit, and, while it is no part of our business to condemn any decent dance, Irish dances are not to be put out of the place, that is their due, in any educational establishment under our care. They may not be the fashion in London or Paris. They should be the fashion in Ireland. Irish dances do not make degenerates.

The Dance Halls (extract)

by Flann O'Brien in *The Bell*, 1941

The dancing itself is of the most perfunctory order. If the hall is small and the crowd enormous (and this is the normal situation) the parties quickly lock themselves into a solid mass and keep shuffling and sweating for ten minutes in the space of a square foot, like a vast human centipede marking time. If the hall is roomy and the crowd small, the dancers shuffle about in great circles and can travel a considerable distance in the course of an evening. If a lad cycles 20 miles to a dance and 20 miles home and does another ten miles in the hall, he is clearly in earnest about his dancing.

Just as the success of a dear dance depends on the extraterritoriality of the band, no cheap dance can be said to have succeeded if the door of the hall can be readily opened from without after the first half-hour. The crowd inside must be so dense that an entire re-packing and re-arrangement of the patrons is necessary before even the blade of a knife could be inserted through the door. When you do enter, you find yourself in air of the kind that blurts out on you from an oven when you open it. All about you is an impenetrable blue tobacco haze that is sometimes charged with a palpable fine filth beaten up out of the floor. Whether standing or dancing, the patrons are all *i bhfastodh* (ie, 'in a clinch') on each other like cows in a cattle truck, exuding sweat in rivers and enjoying themselves immensely. Nobody is self-conscious about sweat. It rises profusely in invisible vapour from all and sundry and there is no guarantee that each cloud will condense on its true owner.

Irish dancing is a thing apart. There is perhaps one céilidhe held for every 20 dances. The foxtrot and the Fairy Reel are mutually repugnant and will not easily dwell under the same roof. Very few adherents of the 'ballroom' canon will have anything, to do with a jig or a reel. Apart from the fact that the Irish dance is ruled out in most halls by considerations of space or perspiration, there is a real psychological obstacle. It is a very far cry from the multiple adhesion of enchanted country stomachs in a twilight of coloured bulbs to the impersonal free-for-all of a clattering reel. Irish dancing is emotionally cold, unromantic and always well-lighted.

Some district justices have a habit of taking leave of their senses at the annual licensing sessions. They want Irish dancing and plenty of it, even at the most monster 'gala dance.' They believe that Satan with all his guile is baffled by a four-hand reel and cannot make head or tail of the Rakes of Mallow. I do not think that there is any real ground for regarding Irish dancing as a sovereign spiritual and nationalistic prophylactic. If there is, heaven help the defenceless nations of other lands.

PAGAN OFFERINGS THE ORIGINS OF THE LUGHNASA FESTIVAL

LARGELY TAKEN FROM THE FESTIVAL OF LUGHNASA BY
MAIRE MACNEILL

Throughout the whole of Ireland and in parts of Great Britain and France, a festival celebrating the beginning of harvest was held every year in early August. In Ireland that festival was called Lughnasa after Lugh, the pagan god, who had once more provided the rich crops. (Lugh's counterpart was the Roman god Mercury, and the Greek god Hermes.)

Even as late as 1962, when Maire MacNeill first published her definitive study *The Festival of Lughnasa*, she claimed: 'We have found the survival of Lughnasa at 195 sites in Ireland ... Lughnasa was celebrated until recently on 95 heights and by ten lakes and five river banks.' Mountain tops were favourite sites for the festival, sometimes involving a journey that took hours. Wells, river banks and lakes were also chosen as sacred areas for the primal rites.

The festival varied from place to place and from generation to generation. The sacrifice of animals seems to have disappeared early in its evolution in Ireland, but many elements remained constant throughout the centuries. There was always a solemn first cutting of the corn or wheat which the head of the family or the chief man of the community would offer to Lugh.

'From the Hebrides,' MacNeill tells us, 'there is the impressive and detailed description of the father's ceremonial reaping of the first sheaf, his waving it thrice above his head, the chant said while doing so, in which a blessing is invoked, and protection sought from the ills which threaten the crops'. Also in Scotland, cakes for each member of the family were made from the hastily winnowed and ground grain; and in Ireland, where potatoes had taken the place of bread as the main food, a special meal from the first digging was eaten on La Lughnasa, the first day of the festival.

In return for these hill-top offerings, Lugh gave his people another kind of first-fruit, the small, dark blue bilberries growing wild on the hillside. No Lughnasa custom has been more lasting than the picking of bilberries; they were looked on as an earnest of the earth's fruitfulness and the bounty of the deity. It was important that everyone should eat them, and that some should be brought home to the old and the weak who were unable to climb the hill.

But in all the records and recollections of the Lughnasa festivities in Ireland, dancing is the most prominent and persistent element. In Kerry, for example, the best dancing couple was chosen on the hilltops of Drung Hill and Cnoc na dTobar. Lughnasa dancing competitions were held, too, on the Playback Mountain in County Leitrim, on the Blackstairs in Wexford, and on Slieve Bloom between Leix and Offaly. And at Ganiamore in County Donegal the prize for the best male dancer was his choice of bride from among all the female contestants.

The Lughnasa festival was so important in the lives of the people, and so involved with their notions of welfare, that Christianity had to adopt it or permit it to survive. 'It could not crush it as it may have crushed observances at the other quarterly feasts,' MacNeill says. 'It succeeded in turning the most important assemblies into Christian devotions ... but in taking them over it took over inevitably some of the old stories, altered only in making a saint, not a god, the people's champion. If – as seems certain from our survey – it left a great number unconverted to Christian devotion, it succeeded in suppressing specifically pagan customs.'

Lilting, bilberries and bracelets: an oral account of Lughnasa from County Donegal

As I remember it, I heard people say that it was on the first Sunday of the month of Lughnasa they used to have a great day on the tops of the hills about here looking for bilberries. The Sunday was set out specially for the young people, to go off to the hills as soon as the mid-day was eaten, and they would not return again until twilight had fallen. Those nearer Beltany went to the top of that hill and in the same way people living near Carn Treuna went there. Indeed the young boys used to go whichever place their girls would be.

After reaching the top of the hill they would sit and eat their lunches. They used to bring flat cakes of oatmeal and milk for the day. Then they would go here and there over the hill looking for bilberries. Sometimes they would scatter in pairs – boys and girls – and other times they would go in groups.

When they returned from their gathering of bilberries they had a strange custom. They all sat down on the hill-top and the boys began to make bracelets of bilberries for the girls. They had brought short threads in their pockets for the purpose. Each man would then compete with another as to which would make the best and prettiest bracelet for his own girl. When that was done a man, or maybe a girl, would be named to sing a song. The melody would begin then and go round from one to another, and anyone who had a note of music at all in his head would have to keep the fun going.

After the singing they would begin the dancing. According to the old talk, they had no instrument for music at all; they had to make do with lilting. In those days boys and girls were good at lilting, and they would make enough music for those who were dancing.

When all was over then and they were preparing to go home, the girls would take off the bilberry bracelets and leave them on the hilltop. Whatever meaning there was to that, none of the old people were able to tell me, but they all knew it and they heard from their elders that it was customary for them to do that. They would all come down then and go home.

This oral account in 1942 from Gortahork, County Donegal, is in the archives of the Department of Irish Folklore, University College, Dublin.

IN CONVERSATION

MITCHELL MORENO TALKS TO THE DIRECTOR OF DANCING AT LUGHNASA, ANNA MACKMIN

How did you first come across *Dancing at Lughnasa*? Had you seen the film, or a previous production?

I'd never seen a production of it, and I'd never seen the film. And I'd be completely incapable of directing it if I had! Although I've done quite a few revivals in recent years, I do think of myself primarily as a new writing director. I wouldn't know how to direct a play I've seen. Before I was asked by the producer to read *Dancing at Lughnasa*, I was appallingly ignorant of Brian Friel's work. When I read the play it was a real moment of epiphany. I thought, "I became a director so I could direct this person's work!" Everything about it is utterly to my taste.

But hadn't you directed Friel's work before?

I was initially approached about *Lughnasa* a couple of years ago and yes, last year I got to direct his new version of *Hedda Gabler* at the Gate Theatre, which was about 50% Ibsen and 50% Brian Friel. It was a remarkable experience and the beginning of what – I hope – will be a long relationship with his plays. I use the word advisedly but Brian really is a genius. There are very few, but he is one.

You said on the first day of rehearsals that this was the finest play you've had the privilege to direct.

I think it's a perfect play. It has inherent within it so many different forms: it is absolutely naturalistic, and yet its effect is pure theatre. It's *about* theatre, as well as being about the practical realities of the individuals involved. It's also about making art and the transformative power of art. It's funny, it's moving. It's got everything. I suppose theatre can have, at its very best, the equivalent to what people think of as a spiritual effect. Brian seems to me to harness that and anchor it in an intellectual search. Something about the potential, in humanity, for faith in hope. In hope for humanity. Consciousness. I think that's something uniquely theatrical, and something that Friel of all living playwrights does best.

So are you saying there's a level at which this is a hopeful play?

No, I'm saying something more complex than that. I'm saying that it's about the potential for us to have hope in the idea of faith. Of faith in humanity; I'm not talking about God or spirituality in any way. The play allows you to hope that if you can hold the absolute contradiction that your memory is both real and completely made up. If you can carry that notion forward into the present, with consciousness about who you are today, then you have the potential to be a complex and fully functioning human being. If you can stand in the centre of a moment in history, and look hopefully towards the future, then who knows..? It's quite a complicated notion, it's very elusive.



How are you approaching the play in rehearsals?

Well I've never assisted another director, so I don't know how other directors direct. I just do what I do in the rehearsal room. I don't have any specific exercises or techniques. I just work on the text, pulling the actors to what I think is what they can do best, in order that their character adheres as clearly as possible to what is written. Brian's stage directions are great and really specific. Packed with clues. There's no messing with them. It was with some trepidation therefore that I looked at the opening stage direction of the famous tableau, which in a sense bookends the play. I had a suspicion that doing it in-the-round wouldn't work. It wouldn't create the effect that it's intended to create. It might become confusing and diluting of focus. Because working in-the-round is a completely different engine from the proscenium arch. How you work the focus in the space is very different. It's far harder to control the image. Sometimes, as the director, you need the whole audience to be seeing the same thing at the same time. This can never happen in this configuration. So I phoned Brian and I said, 'I don't want to mess with anything you've written'. Literally a comma, a dash, an ellipsis; these things really matter to me, anything Brian has put in his play I will honour. That's the point of my job, to become utterly invisible. To honour Brian. But I explained to him my thoughts about the opening. He gave me permission to adhere to what is written, but not to be shackled by the performance history of the play. So I've taken the opening and the end apart and reworked them from the starting point of Michael's need.



In what way?

Well for me, getting into the play is all about the character of Michael. I was talking to someone the other day who used the phrase 'the framing device of the narrator'. I thought 'No, it's really not a *device*!' It's so much more than that. As the director I have to be able to answer the question 'Why is Michael here? Why is he compelled to talk to the audience?' That is what the actor is playing – the need to talk, the need to share. If I can't answer the 'Why?' of Michael, if the whole production isn't driven by that need, there is no justification for doing this play. It's all about why Michael arrives at this point. He's trying to put together what it was about this moment in 1936 where his family cracked open, where these unbiddable and uncontrollable forces came through, and where the whole world changed forever. It was not just the political reality of what was going on in Ireland at that time but also – for want of a better phrase – the emotional metabolism of his family, which was completely transformed by this moment. So my root into the production is that Michael might be a writer, and he's at a point in his life where he can't go forward unless he works out the past. That's the journey of the play for me; Michael starting with an empty page, saying 'There's this moment in my life which I just can't get beyond' and then suddenly he's in that moment. So there's never anything reflective, it's all totally active. By the end, hopefully, it's a moment of profound realisation for Michael. Such moments even go beyond words, go beyond language, and again that's what theatre is for. It can have this otherness attendant on it where you can actually change people's lives. The nitty gritty of making theatre is very tiring and very difficult. You stand up there and it's very exposing, because in saying 'I'm trying to make sense of this' you reveal a lot about who you are.

Is that the same for everyone involved in making the work?

I think so. I'm not really interested in working with people for whom it isn't. You kind of scent them out. I've worked with Niamh several times, I've worked with Fin a couple of times now, and they are absolutely kindred spirits. But in rehearsals I don't talk about this; you can be working on very mundane stuff, punctuation and so on. You think you know what a character is, but it's entirely dependent on what an actor brings. You can't have a vision without an actor. It doesn't mean a row of beans unless the actors have that potential within them. I think it was Judi Dench who said you can never be greater or more on stage than you are in your own life. Which I think is true.

You talked about the ‘why?’ of Michael as an adult remembering these events, and how you’ve created for him what you could call a back history. Is that something you work through for all the characters in the play?

The better the actor is, the more of those questions they’ve begun to ask for themselves before you start rehearsals. The privilege of working in a building like this is that you get to work with absolutely the best actors you could find. I don’t sit down with charts and bits of paper and say ‘Now then, on this day...’. We do talk about it but essentially I’m more engaged in energy and in the specifics of language; really precisely adhering to the text and working out exactly why, for example, Kate may walk into the kitchen at the same moment as somebody else is mentioning Father Jack, and then two lines later *she’s* got a line about Father Jack. And you realise that she’s overheard something, which for her underlies the paranoia that all the world is talking about him, and that this precious hero of her life is being maligned. So it’s vital that she overhears the line, but only half overhears it. So it’s working out stuff like that, that’s how we rehearse. It would be easy to do this play reflectively, because it’s a memory play. But I’m trying to find a route through the play where the whole thing is a revelation rather than an assumption.

Is there anything about staging it in-the-round that impacts on that?

Massively. It was written for a proscenium arch theatre. There are three worlds in the play: kitchen, garden, and Michael. The stage area in The Old Vic was made for *The Norman Conquests*. Each play in that trio is set in a single space. So one is a dining room, one a kitchen, one a sitting room. We have to create three realities in one space, and that’s very difficult. It’s much easier in a proscenium arch to go ‘Here’s the picture’, and to create focus. Or indeed to do it with a revolve. But working in-the-round is also cracking the play open in really interesting ways. And I suppose what’s interesting about it is that people in the audience are having a very similar effect to being in a family. In a family you might share a meal and suddenly there’s an argument, and you didn’t see it brewing but the person sitting on the other side of the table did. And that’s exactly what it’s like here; some audience members get one thing but not another. It’s making sure from my point of view that that rotates, so it’s as even as possible, but that it’s also as pointed as possible. And remember, the only thing everyone in the audience shares is family. It’s a play that talks about ritual, about pagan ritual, and the circle is the most basic aspect of that. Life goes round and round in circles.



IN CONVERSATION

MITCHELL MORENO TALKS TO FOUR OF THE ACTRESSES PLAYING THE MUNDY SISTERS: NIAMH CUSACK, WHO PLAYS MAGGIE; MICHELLE FAIRLEY, WHO PLAYS KATE; SIMONE KIRBY, WHO PLAYS ROSE; AND ANDREA CORR, WHO PLAYS CHRIS.

Quite often actresses complain about there being fewer good roles for women than for men. I suppose this play is definitely an exception to that?

Simone: Yes, I think that's Brian Friel for you!. He writes brilliant women, in all his plays. I think that must be something to do with his upbringing, he's got a great understanding of women.

Michelle: He seems to have a love of them, a respect for them.

Simone: Some male writers seem to write what they think a woman says and sounds like. He just writes what a *person* says, and sometimes they happen to be women. He understands people's deepest needs.

The writing for each of the sisters is very detailed and specific. How do you approach building the characters in rehearsals?

Niamh: The reason you take on any character is that you can see places where you and the character have something in common.

Like Maggie; I have sisters, I love dancing, I love the outdoors. And then I suppose you also look at where you and the character are

different. I combed through the play looking for what people said about Maggie; whether or not you think it's true. Because sometimes someone says something and it's not actually true of your character, or they have misunderstood your character. There's a lot of Maggie that I feel an affinity with, but there are also things which are quite different to me. I think she's braver than I am, she's certainly wittier than I am. But all the characters are really well written, and if you just have faith in that, it'll probably work.

Andrea: Everything fits so well together. You have to be very aware of how your role fits into everything and everyone else. You really have to listen to people, it's such an ensemble piece.

Michelle: For me my starting point in rehearsals is the script. I build the character from there. Friel is so specific, these women are all like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. It's so well balanced and defined, that if you try and put bits together in the wrong way they don't work. It's deceptively subtle. You think it's easy but it's not at all, it's perfectly pitched and balanced.

Simone: There are so many tiny choices, if you change something it affects everyone else. That's what rehearsals are about. You try things out and make mistakes.

Niamh: I start by trying to find the places where I feel really safe, and bleed into the stuff that I'm not so sure about. For instance I think that Maggie is a watcher, and a peace maker, she's looking for bridges everywhere. She sometimes tries to diffuse tense situations with a joke or by changing the subject. So you gradually put the pieces together. It's like you're drawing a face, but you only have the outline to start with; you have the dots but you have to work to join them up.

So in joining those dots you must have a lot of questions. For example why are none of you married? When did your parents die? How do these questions get answered? In rehearsals, on your own?

Simone: For me the question of why I'm not married is quite clear, because Rose has a disability. But the other sisters all have their own reasons.

Niamh: There are certain things that for me are secret. I'm beginning to think it's a good thing to have in every play, to have a little secret. You guard them even in the rehearsal room. There are things which I don't think it's necessary to tell everybody, just as I don't think Maggie feels the need. There are things that have happened to Maggie or things she's discovered that give her a secret place to go, and I think that's very important in this play. I think each of them has a secret place.

Andrea: Chris isn't married because she had her child out of wedlock and so she's sullied. In those times they had the Magdelene Laundries and so on. Girls who were pregnant would just be gone, they'd disappear in the middle of the night. We've come to think that our parents in the play were already dead when Chris got pregnant, and that everyone rallied round. And also that having the status of a priest in the family, we were allowed to keep this child where normally you wouldn't be able to. But really if Gerry Evans is not for me, then nobody is for me. I'm alone.



Doesn't he propose to you?

Andrea: Yes, but it's not a real proposal, it's a Gerry proposal! I suppose everyone's got their arc in the play, and Chris's arc is that she's growing and learning: Gerry lives in the moment, and so I'm going to live in this moment too. That's a very big step for her. Because in my head she would of course have said 'yes' a year or so previous. But now she's thought, 'Well I'm just going to have to love him when he's here, that's all I can have of him'. She's forgiving of him, she understands that it's his nature, that he can't help it. That's her coming of age in a way.

Michelle: That's so mature. Kate wouldn't be able to cope with that emotional objectivity at all.

Has Kate had opportunities to marry, or to court boys in her youth?

Michelle: No, she made a decision very early on when father and mother died, and Jack went off. She's a teacher, she became – along with Maggie – the parental figure of the house. That doesn't prevent her from longing, or even fabricating in her own head some sort of romance. But she never vocalises it, ever. She constantly compacts things. She decided long ago 'This is my role and I have to fulfil it.' In fact Maggie is a lot stronger emotionally than Kate. Kate is the layer of the law, but she's very brittle. Her persona is tough, but internally she's not.

Playing sisters who have lived together all their lives in one small cottage, is it hard to establish a depth of family intimacy that feels cemented in reality, in such a short rehearsal time?

Niamh: There is something extraordinary that happens in rehearsal; it's a bit like being caught with your pants down. Your inadequacies, your worries about what you can and can't do, are all pretty evident to everyone in the room. And they all have them too. So there's sort of a bargain made quite early on. You know that these people are going to be there for you. So you begin bravely to treat them badly or to feel able to have a spat, just like in a family.

Simone: I think that very quickly with this play you have to be tactile with people, you have to be able to feel free to touch people.

Michelle: You also have to remember that it's 1936 and Friel is very specific about how they touch. They don't hug. There's a scene we rehearsed yesterday and we ended up with Maggie hugging Kate, and we realised that was wrong, it was too contemporary. It had to be Maggie holding Kate but in a way that was more restraining or containing her. There's a kind of rigidity to them. They don't invade each other's spaces too much. They are not open with their emotions.

The stage directions Friel writes are very detailed. A lot of actors and directors might start by taking a heavy pencil to them because they want to find their own way, they don't want to be restricted. What has been your approach?

Andrea: I think we all take them very seriously because Brian doesn't write them lightly. They are always clues.

Niamh: In some places Anna [Mackmin, the director] has suggested we leave aside the literal stage direction he's written but instead take the spirit of it. Because we are working in-the-round, and sometimes because Anna wants to take any softness out of it, I think there are places where she has suggested we play against what we're feeling. Sometimes what Brian is writing in the stage directions is our subtext, what's going on inside us. And there are a couple of places where perhaps we can be more economical with that. To pull a harder punch.

Michelle: We never say 'Oh I'll walk through that pause'. They are all there for a reason, in terms of the music of the play. You have to listen to that.



You mention the impact of working in-the-round. Can you tell me more about that?

Simone: Well you can't stay in one position very long. You have to make sure you keep moving around. We're learning where is the strongest position to be, and where is the best position to help somebody else have the focus. It's much harder to give someone else the focus in-the-round, you can't do it as easily. So figuring out how to make sure the audience are looking at one particular thing, we're learning that.

Michelle: If you have a proscenium arch theatre it's much easier, you know where to look. It's easier to carry on a physical action, for example unpacking groceries, which I have to do. But in the round it can shift focus. You can't necessarily carry on doing something.

Simone: Everywhere you move you're being observed. You can't fake it. You have to follow everything through.

Andrea: I think for this play, and this family, it lends to the intimacy of it that you don't really have any privacy. That is part of being in a close family. The round makes that absolutely true.

Niamh: Yes and you have to share all the time, both with each other and the audience. It's a thought thing, a mental state. You just have to know there are always people behind you.

I read the other day that Friel said his plays are written for an Irish audience, but if they happen to be overheard by foreigners then that's ok. Do you think putting this play on in London, for an English audience, changes the play in any way ?

Andrea: I think it is a universal play. Regardless of the smell of turf being there, the themes are universal; the dynamics between family members, people's relationships, their hopes...

Simone: There are maybe details which if you're from Ireland you will get, but I don't think you're missing anything if you don't.

Michelle: The whole thing about the role of the church, and the brother being a priest, that's such a major part of Irish society particularly at that time. They lived by Catholic laws, it's a very specific and a very Irish experience.

Niamh: I think that just like Chekhov or Ibsen, Brian Friel is writing about something very specific to our country. Bringing it over to England, I suppose the danger always is that it could appear romantic or slightly "oyrish". But we all have family members. We all have hopes that have been dashed, and we survive. It's that yearning to bloom or blossom that we all have, that is in the play. I think it's not just an Irish play because of that. The wit is very Irish but the dilemmas and the hopes and the aspirations and the disappointments are all totally universal. Human is human is human.

Have you had to do much research to prepare for your roles?

Simone: Well, I've had to learn how to knit gloves! But it's not so far removed, the world that's in the play is within living memory. My grandmother is from that time, so I understand a lot through her.

Niamh: My mother was from Donegal and my godmother is still living on a farm in the Midlands and she's 82, so her period is this play. I used to spend every weekend down on that farm, so I know all about making hen mash!

Michelle: We all have older relatives and so on who have lived through that. A simpler time, living on the land, having nothing, but being happy. Halcyon days, as they say.

Is that the world of this play; halcyon days? Or is it something quite bleak?

Andrea: I don't think it's one thing. The moments that we see are, for these women, very intense moments. They are on the brink of change, the whole country is on the brink of change. So you have one foot planted there, and actually you might be very reluctant to move, because even though it might be a hard life, times are changing and that's frightening. But then you do see a bit of the beauty of simplicity as well. What I think about Brian's writing is that it is so real, it never is halcyon or bleakness. There are many dimensions to it.

Simone: There's also the thing of Michael looking back on something. The reason he's remembering this particular time is because it's the last few days when they were all together. He's remembering how much tension there was, because just afterwards things broke apart.

Michelle: Every character is going through a change. The question is whether they want to embrace it, or whether they are afraid of it. Maybe they don't know possibly that it's coming. Whereas Kate knows it's coming, and her only way to cope is to try keep control, but with this change control is out of her grasp. That's her weakness.



PERFORMANCE HISTORY OF MAJOR PRODUCTIONS

Dancing at Lughnasa premiered at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin on 24 April 1990

Cast		Creative team	
Michael Evans	Gerard McSorley	Director	Patrick Mason
Kate Mundy	Frances Tomelty	Designer	Joe Vanek
Maggie Mundy	Anita Reeves	Lighting design	Trevor Dawson
Rose Mundy	Bríd Ní Neachtain	Sound design	T Richard Fitzgerald
Agnes Mundy	Brid Brennan		
Christina Mundy	Catherine Byrne		
Gerry Evans	Paul Herzberg		
Jack Mundy	Barry McGovern		

The UK premiere was in the Lyttelton at Royal National Theatre, London on 15 October 1990

Cast		Creative team	
Michael Evans	Gerard McSorley	Director	Patrick Mason
Kate Mundy	Rosaleen Linehan	Designer	Joe Vanek
Maggie Mundy	Anita Reeves	Lighting	Trevor Dawson
Rose Mundy	Bríd Ní Neachtain	Choreographer	Terry John Bates
Agnes Mundy	Brid Brennan		
Christina Mundy	Catherine Byrne		
Gerry Evans	Stephen Dillane		
Jack Mundy	Alec McCowen		

This production transferred to The Phoenix Theatre, West End on 25 March 1991.

The production won the 1991 Evening Standard Award for Best Play, and the 1991 Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Play.

The United States premier was at the Plymouth Theatre, Broadway on 24 October 1991

Cast		Creative team	
Michael Evans	Gerard McSorley	Director	Patrick Mason
Kate Mundy	Rosaleen Linehan	Designer	Joe Vanek
Maggie Mundy	Dearbhla Molloy	Lighting design	Trevor Dawson
Rose Mundy	Bríd Ní Neachtain	Sound design	T Richard Fitzgerald
Agnes Mundy	Brid Brennan		
Christina Mundy	Catherine Byrne		
Gerry Evans	Robert Gwilym		
Jack Mundy	Donal Donnelly		

The production won the 1992 New York Drama Critics' Circle for Best Play and the 1992 Tony Award for Best Play.

A film of Dancing at Lughnasa was released 13 November 1998

Cast			
Narrator (Michael)	Gerard McSorley	Michael	Darrell Johnston
Kate Mundy	Meryl Streep	Danny Bradley	Lorcan Cranitch
Father Jack Mundy	Michael Gambon	Father Carlin	John Kavanagh
Christina Mundy	Catherine McCormack	Vera McLoughlin	Marie Mullen
Maggie Mundy	Kathy Burke	Sophie McLoughlin	Dawn Bradfield
Rose Mundy	Sophie Thompson	Austin Morgan	Peter Gowen
Agnes Mundy	Brid Brennan	Chemist	Kate O'Toole
Gerry Evans	Rhys Ifans		

Creative team

Director	Pat O'Connor
Screenplay	Frank McGuinness

The film won an Irish Film and Television Award for Best Actor in a Female Role by Brid Brennan.

FURTHER READING

On Brian Friel

Brian Friel: A Casebook, edited by William Kerwin

The Cambridge Companion to Brian Friel (Cambridge Companions to Literature), edited by A Roche

The Student Guide to the Stagecraft of Brian Friel, David Grant

About Friel, by Tony Coult

Brian Friel in Conversation, Paul Delaney

The Art of Brian Friel: Neither Reality Nor Dreams, Elmer Andrews

On the Irish economy and industrialisation

The Economic Development of Ireland in the Twentieth Century, KA Kennedy, T Giblin, and D McHugh

The Modernisation of Irish Society 1848–1918, JJ Lee

An Economic History of Ulster 1820–1939, L Kennedy and P Ollerenshaw

On women in Irish society

A Social History of Women in Ireland: 1870–1970, Rosemary Cullen Owens

On Irish migration

Demography, State and Society: Irish Migration to Britain: 1921–1971, Enda Delaney

On Lughnasa

The Festival of Lughnasa: A Study of the Survival of the Celtic Festival of the Beginning of the Harvest, Maire MacNeill

Online resources at the Delargy Centre for Irish Folklore and the National Folklore Collection

Go to <http://ivrla.ucd.ie/>

Then navigate through to **School's manuscript collection Carna**