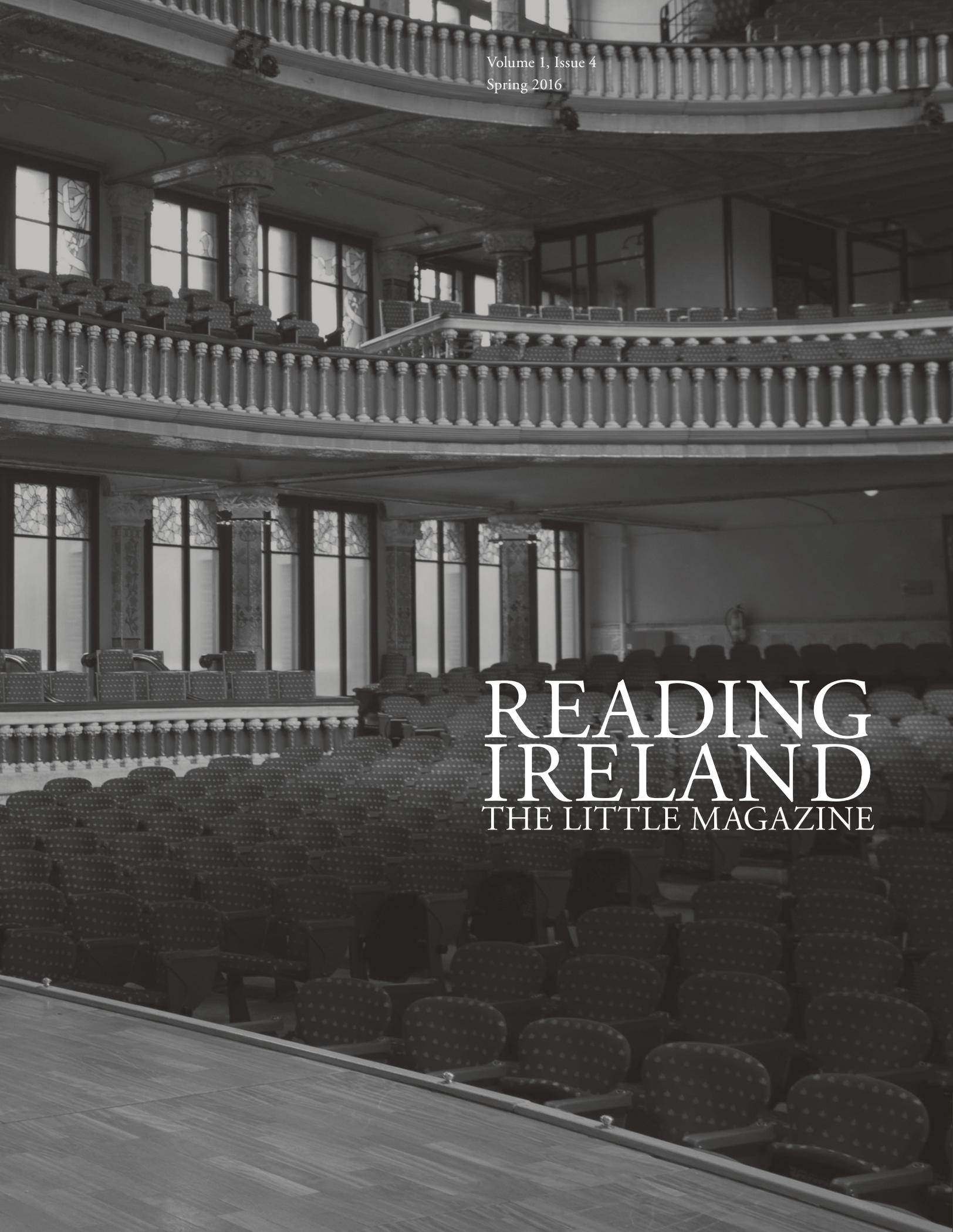


Volume 1, Issue 4  
Spring 2016



READING  
IRELAND  
THE LITTLE MAGAZINE

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## Subscribe

Every quarter, Reading Ireland will publish an E-Journal, Reading Ireland: The Little Magazine, which will be available to subscribers for an annual fee of \$40. The magazine will be published in Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter. The aim of this publication is to provide in-depth analysis of Irish literature, past and present, through a series of essays and articles written by myself and other Irish and American writers and academics, along with opening a window onto the best of contemporary Irish poetry, prose and drama. To honor the tradition of Irish Literary Magazines, each issue will also focus on a specific "Little Magazine" from the first half of the twentieth-century.

Volume 1, issue 1 which appeared in Spring 2015 is available to download at no cost under the 'subscribe' tab on our website, [www.readingireland.net](http://www.readingireland.net), so that you as the reader can decide if this is a publication you would like to receive on a quarterly basis.

## Contributors

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# Introduction



Photo: Brad Reed

Welcome to the fourth issue of Reading Ireland, which focuses on Irish drama. We begin with a critical introduction to the work of Brian Friel, a towering figure within contemporary Irish theatre, who passed away on October 2, 2015 at the age of 86. Friel's sustained critique of a rapidly changing Irish society during the second half of the twentieth-century has yielded some of the most important plays in the modern Irish dramatic canon. Accompanying this essay are a series of photos by award winning Northern Irish photographer, Bobbie Hanvey, a longtime friend of the playwright, whose photographs of Friel provide a rare glimpse into the world of this very private artist. Following this is an in-depth interview with Marina Carr, one of the most original theatrical voices to emerge in Ireland in the late 1980s. Carr's plays are informed by the Irish midlands where she grew up, as well as by issues of gender, sexuality and female agency. Her work often draws on Greek tragedy and mythology, which she sometimes interweaves into the landscape of contemporary Ireland. This interview is preceded by an introduction to Carr's work by Professor Melissa Sihra, an Assistant Professor of Drama at the Samuel Beckett Centre in Trinity College, Dublin. Sihra's work as a dramaturg includes American productions of Carr and Brian Friel, and she is currently working on a monograph on the theatre of Marina Carr.

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We next turn to an Irish theatrical figure from the past, the director Tomás Mac Anna, the artistic director of the Abbey Theatre from 1972-8 and 1984-5. Mac Anna is remembered by his son, the musician and filmmaker Ferdia Mac Anna, in a bittersweet and moving tribute. New York-based Irish writer and director Seamus Scanlon contributes a personal narrative on the depiction of violence on stage. Scanlon tested his theories in the recent productions of *The McGowan Trilogy*, three interrelated one act plays that were staged in New York (2014), England (2015), and in his native city of Galway (2015). We are delighted to include for our readers

the 2016 season from the internationally acclaimed Galway theatre company, Druid. Highlights include productions of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, as well as the world premiere of *Helen and I*, by Tuam playwright Meadhbh McHugh. Druid and its Artistic Director, Garry Hynes, are perhaps best known in the United States for their touring productions of *Druid Synge* and *Druid Murphy*. Just recently, the company won the 2016 Irish Times Audience Choice prize for *Druid Shakespeare: The History Plays*, which condensed four Shakespeare histories (*Richard II*, *Henry IV, Part 1*, *Henry IV, Part 2* and *Henry V*), into a seven-hour marathon performance which was staged in Galway and at the Lincoln Center in Washington D.C.

The book review in this issue focuses on the recently released memoir from the late Northern Irish theatre director, James Ellis, *Troubles Over The Bridge: Jimmy Ellis And His Fight Against Censorship Of The Arts*. The book was published by the Lagan Press, and it serves as a timely reminder of the importance of artistic freedom and the necessity of taking a stand against censorship of the arts. Also in this issue is a spotlight on an exciting and comprehensive new website for theatre books: <http://www.thetheatrebookshop.com/> Designed by John McEvoy, the owner of the award-winning independent bookshop Crannóg, which is based in Cavan, Ireland. McEvoy's background is in theatre, and he has created a valuable resource for students, teachers, and theatre practitioners everywhere. In addition to an extensive collection of published plays by both Irish and international playwrights, the site boasts a wide variety of books on all aspects of stagecraft, along with texts on dramatic theory and criticism. Clearly, there are many more talented contemporary Irish playwrights that merit attention, and while space constraints prevented the inclusion of more writers, we would encourage our readers to seek out productions and read the published works of following dramatists: Sebastian Barry, Dermot Bolger, Anne Devlin, Bernard Farrell, Tom Kilroy, Frank McGuinness, Tom MacIntyre, Tom Murphy, Martin McDonagh, Conor McPearson, Billy Roche, Peter Sheridan and Enda Walsh.

Finally, we look at the work of one of the first Irish female playwrights, Lady Augusta Gregory. Widely known for her close association with and patronage of the poet W.B. Yeats, Gregory was also a key figure in the Irish Literary Revival and one of the founding members along with Yeats and Edward Martyn of the Irish Literary Theatre in 1897. In the essay that concludes our drama issue we assess Gregory's early playwriting career in the context of her published work in *Samhain* (1901-1908), the second of three theatrical "Little Magazines" founded by Yeats to help support the Irish Dramatic movement.

# Brian Friel: A Critical Overview

With accompanying photographs by award winning Northern Ireland photographer Bobbie Hanvey<sup>1</sup>

by Adrienne Leavy

## The imagination is the only conscience.

(Brien Friel diary entry, 17 October 1977).



Photograph courtesy of The Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

On October 2 2015 the Irish playwright Brian Friel, widely regarded as “a national cultural icon,” passed away at his home in Greencastle County Donegal, at the age of eighty-six. One week later he was laid to rest in a simple ceremony at Glenties Cemetery, without public fanfare or spectacle, in accordance with his wishes. Although generally considered to be Ireland’s most important contemporary playwright, this quiet departure from the human stage epitomized Friel’s private personality. He was part of the generation of Irish dramatists who came of age after Samuel Beckett which include Hugh Leonard (*b.1929*), Tom McIntyre (*b.1931*), Thomas Kilroy (*b.1934*), and Tom Murphy (*b.1935*). Aside from Leonard, who found success on Broadway with his play *Da*, Friel was the most internationally celebrated of his peers. He was also unique among contemporary Irish dramatists in that, with the exception of Beckett, many of his plays had attained canonical status during his lifetime.

Born in Killyclogher near Omagh, County Tyrone in 1929 to Mary McLoone and Patrick Friel, the young Friel and his parents moved to Derry when he was ten years old. Like his fellow northerner Seamus Heaney, he was educated in St. Columb’s College. Friel initially entertained the idea of becoming a priest; however, the two years he spent in the

seminary in Maynooth (which he described as “an awful experience”) convinced him otherwise, and instead he choose the path of his father and became a teacher, spending a decade in a Christian Brother’s school in Derry. Although raised in Derry and teaching in that city until 1960, it was his mother’s home village of Glenties in County Donegal that ultimately became his home, both physically, and imaginatively.

Nationalism and Catholicism were the formative influences on Friel’s life, and his status as a Northern Irish Catholic nationalist is often cited as the dominant factor underpinning the sense of exile and disenfranchment that permeates his work. Also relevant is the geographic location of Donegal, a border county in Southern Ireland where Friel and his wife Anne raised their children; the northern town of Derry is only a few miles from the border of Donegal. From this geographic vantage point Friel was able to straddle the partitioned border of two worlds: Northern and Southern Ireland. It is thus not surprising that identity in Friel’s drama is often bifurcated and, as Anthony Roche had argued, “a sense of doubleness” is a hallmark of much of his writing.

Other major themes in Friel's drama include the erratic workings of memory, and the complexities of family relationships, where identity is often aligned with the concept of home and how one remembers this emotional terrain. His plays are concerned with the personal, interior world of his characters, and the manner in which memory or nostalgia facilitates their self-deception. Friel has stated that he had "a strong belief in racial memory," and he explores this idea through the interplay of history and the unreliability of recollection. At the heart of each play is the primacy of language, the double-edged danger of the spoken word, and the fact that what is left unspoken is often just as important as the dialogue on stage.



Photograph courtesy of Bobbie Hanvey.

Friel began by writing short stories in the 1950s, and he enjoyed considerable success in the genre, publishing two collections of stories, *The Saucer of Larks* (1962) and *The Gold in the Sea* (1966), while also regularly publishing his work in the *New Yorker*. Viewing his stories as derivative of earlier masters of the genre such as Frank O'Connor and Liam O'Flaherty, he switched to drama and in the early 1960s and gave up his teaching job to dedicate himself full-time to writing. In 1963 he spent several crucial months in the United States at Tyrone Guthrie's invitation to observe rehearsals at the new Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. Although he had written several plays prior to his observations of the Guthrie Theatre, this experience proved to be profoundly influential on the future direction of Friel's work.

Many of Friel's mature plays are set in the fictional town of Ballybeg, an everytown which serves as the site of Friel's sustained interrogation of Irish society. The name "Ballybeg" is derived from the Gaelic phrase, *baile beag*, meaning small town; however, it would be a mistake to view Friel as an exclusively Irish or parochial writer based on this geographic anchor. Like Joyce, Friel's aesthetic engagement with Ireland and its people expands beyond the remote locale of the fictional Ballybeg to encompass universal human concerns.

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### **A Consideration of Several of the Plays**

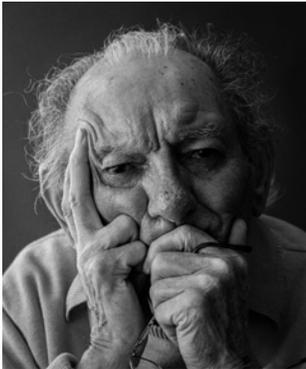
The nine plays discussed below were selected because of their significance in Friel's canon and also because they are representative of the range and diversity of his work. This essay identifies some of the salient features of each drama -- for a more detailed analysis of these plays please consult the works listed at the end.

#### *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964)

Friel's first major critical and commercial success was in 1964, with the emigration play, *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, which he wrote when he returned to Ireland from the US. After the initial production by the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, the play transferred to Broadway for an extended run in 1965-66, and it was this play that established Friel's international reputation. With this work, the experimental nature of Friel's dramaturgy, which emphasizes theatricality over conventional dramatic structures, first became apparent.

Set in a small town in Donegal (the first appearance of Friel's Ballybeg), the play centers on a young man, Gareth O' Donnell, on the eve of his emigration to America. The permeable borders between fantasy and reality are captured in scenes that unfold on a conventional Irish stage set: the kitchen of the house Gar shares with his father. Although ostensibly centered on the issue of emigration, the themes of the play lift it out of the typical 1950s clichéd Irish drama about leaving Ireland. Love is one of the predominant concerns, specifically the

love between a father and son and between a son and his birthplace, and also the failure of Gar to win his sweetheart Kate Doogan. The subjective nature of memory, and how “identity can be destabilized by opposing narratives” (Melissa Shira) is dramatized through Gar’s relationship with his father. This is premised to a large extent on a memory of a happy day he remembers them having spent together on a boating outing on Lough na Cloc; however, his father’s recollection of the event fails to confirm his son’s narrative. The conflicting stories they both tell exemplify the emotional vacuum that exists between the characters. As Roche points out, what the communication gap dramatized by the interaction between father and son reveals is that “there is no private tongue, no shared language of feeling in which and through which they can address each other.”



Photograph courtesy of Bobbie Hanvey.

Friel brilliantly upends the conventional setting of the play by splitting his protagonist’s personality into two characters, Private Gar and Public Gar. Played by two different actors, this dramatic technique enabled Friel to simultaneously explore both the interior and exterior world of the character, or as Friel termed it the “physical” and the “cerebral.” With this device Friel was able to dramatize the way in which the public world impacts upon the private self. Due to the innovative nature of *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* the play is often credited as the starting point of contemporary Irish drama. Thomas Kilroy assesses its impact thus: “What was startlingly different about this play was the sensibility behind it, a mind that was unmistakably of the modern world and one with a clear sense of what modern theatre could do.”

#### *The Freedom of the City* (1973)

*The Freedom of the City* is unique in the Friel canon in that it represents the playwright’s most direct engagement with the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland. On January 30, 1972, British soldiers shot and killed thirteen unarmed civil rights demonstrators in Derry. A tribunal was convened under the direction of Lord Chief Justice Widgery to investigate the shootings. Released on April 18 1972, the tribunal’s report exonerated the soldiers and laid the blame for the incident at the feet of the protestors. The Widgery Report stimulated responses from several artists in Ireland, most notably the poet Thomas Kinsella with his impassioned denunciation of the tribunal’s findings in his poem *Butchers Dozen* (1970). *The Freedom of the City* was viewed as Friel’s aesthetic contribution, although Friel was uneasy with the interpretation that the play was a direct commentary on the political situation in Northern Ireland and he went to great lengths to rebut this assumption. As he explained to Eavan Boland in a 1973 interview:

...the play began long before Bloody Sunday happened. I was working on the theme for about ten months before Bloody Sunday. And then Bloody Sunday happened, and the play I was writing, and wasn’t succeeding with, suddenly found a focus. I was stuck until this point, and this was a kind of clarification. The play, in fact, is the story of three people who are on a Civil Rights march in Derry in 1970. The march finishes in the Guildhall Square. Then the British Army moves in, breaks up the meeting and these three people take refuge in the Guildhall and find themselves in the Mayor’s parlour.

Notwithstanding Friel’s distancing of his play from actual political events, audiences could be forgiven for identifying the work with Bloody Sunday. As Bernice Schrank points out, “Friel includes so many details associated with Bloody Sunday, from the introduction of an

unarmed woman early on the play who speaks the words Bernadette Devlin is reported to have said ('Stand your ground,' [FC:111]) on that day as the soldiers arrived, to his, at the time, instantly recognizable paraphrase of the findings of the Widgery Tribunal." With the passage of time, several critics have interpreted the play differently. As Fintan O' Toole points out, with Friel "his work is frequently less political than it seems." O'Toole reads *The Freedom of the City* as not so much about "Bloody Sunday," but rather "more about the impossibility of writing about Bloody Sunday."

#### *Aristocrats* (1979)

Often cited as Friel's most "Chekhovian" play, *Aristocrats* is an elegiac drama set in an Irish Catholic "Big House" in Ballybeg. Like his previous play *Living Quarters* (1977), *Aristocrats* is an expose of the illusory social and cultural authority that people cling to in the face of the disintegration of their world, but the drama is less concerned with the historical decline of The Big House culture than with the tenuous realities to which the family who grew up in this particular estate cling. Friel's innate humanity as a writer is demonstrable in this sympathetic study of a family which O'Toole described in his review as "teetering on the edge of nothingness."



Photograph courtesy of The Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

Three sisters reunite in their family home with their brother, the excitable Casimir, for the impending wedding of the youngest, the volatile Claire, to a much older local shopkeeper. Judith, the eldest, takes care of their father, the ailing patriarch, Justice O' Donnell, while the alcoholic Alice lives a lonely existence in London, with her husband Eamon, who grew up in the local village. Casimir, unlike his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather before him, failed at a career in the law, and now lives in Germany working in a sausage factory. Also in the house is an American academic, Tom Hoffnung, who is writing a history of the family. Casimir, who was told by his father when he was nine that if he had been born in the village instead of into his privileged position "you'd have become the village idiot," recounts for Tom increasingly elaborate fabricated tales of the famous people who once visited the house. What the play makes clear is that these imaginative fictions are directly bound up with Casimir's sense of the importance of his family, and by extension, his own relevance.

The wedding plans are abruptly postponed when Justice O'Donnell dies and Judith informs her siblings that she must sell the house as she can no longer afford its upkeep. The family is thus poised on the brink of both a physical and emotional dispersal as there will no longer be a physical space to which they can return. The long slide into genteel poverty is illustrated by Casimir's attempt mid-way through the play to locate the four corners of the long-gone croquet lawn, which was subsequently replaced by a tennis court that has also disappeared. Eamon advises Tom to write a fictional account of the family called "*Ballybeg Hall – From Supreme Court to Sausage Factory*," which would chronicle four generations of a family "that lived its life in total isolation.....ignored by its Protestant counterparts, isolated from its own concept of itself."



Photograph courtesy of The Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

### *Faith Healer* (1979)

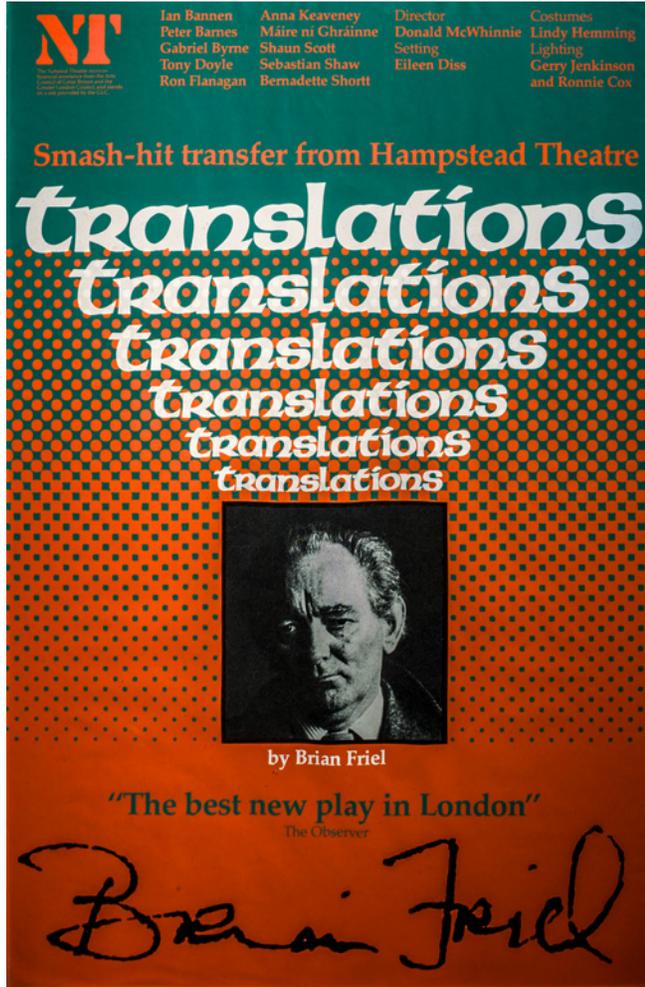
Another of Friel’s memory plays is *Faith Healer*, a story about a faith healer, “The Fantastic Francis Hardy,” his long suffering wife Grace and his loyal manager Teddy. Frank’s faith healing sessions in the forgotten villages of Wales and Scotland are akin to religious revival meetings, and sometimes his brand of hope and belief works. The play takes two predominant Friel themes, the unreliability of memory and the difficulty of communication, and weaves them into a story of three damaged people. Ultimately, *Faith Healer* is about a man who creates his own death by coming out of exile in England and returning home to Ireland. Nicholas Grene, who offers five different ways of reading *Faith Healer*, points out that “the pattern of exile and return is crucial to the dramatic structure and has to be accounted for in any analysis of the play’s meaning.” Frank’s dubious gift ultimately betrays him and leads to his brutal death at the hands of his audience who channel their disappointment into violence against the failed faith healer.

Once again, language and its relationship to real events in peoples’ lives take center stage. The play consists entirely of dramatic monologues, a structural device which serves to underscore the separateness of the three main characters. This narrative innovation showcases Friel’s storytelling abilities as over the course of four monologues the audience is slowly drawn into the lives of the three main characters, each of whom offer different versions of the same story.

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During the first monologue Frank questions whether he is a genuine faith healer or a con man. As he admits early on in the play, occasionally his ministrations “did work.” When that happened he transcended the confines of his personality, and as he tells the audience, “for those few hours I had become whole and perfect in myself.” In the second and third monologues Grace and Teddy tell their versions of Frank’s story, before he returns to the stage with the fourth and final monologue. Few of the narrative assertions in *Faith Healer* go unchallenged, with the notable exception of the tragedy of Grace’s stillborn baby, and as the story progresses the audience realizes that two of the characters are in fact dead.

As Peter Crawley notes, the play initially “bombed on Broadway, but later created a theatrical legend in Donal McCann’s celebrated Abbey performance (in a production directed by Joe Dowling), and it is now widely considered to be Friel’s greatest work.” Since then the play has attracted many actors wishing to play Frank Hardy, including Ralph Fiennes in a highly acclaimed revival by the Gate Theatre in Dublin in 2006 which subsequently transferred to Broadway.



Photograph courtesy of The Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.



Photograph courtesy of Bobbie Hanvey.

### *Translations* (1980)

Arguably Friel's most important work, *Translations* (1980), is an exploration of language, myth and identity within the context of a country split by language and colonialism in the early nineteenth-century. The play, which was the inaugural production for the Field Day company (discussed below), uses the theme of people living with a language that is not their own as a metaphor for the contemporary dilemmas of the two cultures of Northern Ireland: nationalist and unionist. However, the play was not intended as a polemic on contemporary politics and Friel was too skilled a playwright to use his art simply for political propaganda. As Ciaran Carty has noted, "politics are merely incidental to Friel's preoccupations with words." What's at stake in *Translations* is the issue of language and the ambiguities and confusions that are wrought through its nuances.

Set in a hedge-school in Ballybeg in 1833, on the eve of the Irish Famine, the drama unfolds as local place names are being anglicized by the British Royal Engineers during the first Ordinance Survey of Ireland. The play addresses the shift from an indigenous, Irish-speaking culture, to an imposed English speaking culture and the effect this has on the village and by extension the island of Ireland. As *Translations* makes clear, place names in Ireland, like so many other things, are sites of contention. The complexities inherent in the act of translation are embodied in two characters: Owen, the hedge-master's son who left for Dublin and has now returned to act as a translator for the Royal Engineers, and Yolland, the young English officer who falls in love with both Donegal and a local girl, Máire. Yolland is trying to learn Irish so he can woo Máire. Unfortunately for the lovers, while they can communicate their feelings without the ability to speak a common language, the political situation will not allow their relationship to flourish.

Language and its failure to accommodate experience preoccupies all the characters, whether it is Máire, who is learning English so she can emigrate to America, or Sarah, the mute girl who is trying to speak her name, or Hugh, the polyglot hedge-master who teaches Latin and Greek through Irish.

Hugh laments the loss of Gaelic civilization, yet he also recognizes that "a civilization can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape ...of fact."

One of the most distinguishing dramatic aspects of *Translations* is Friel's innovative theatrical device wherein his characters speak the same language (English), but with a translator all the time interpreting what the English and Irish characters are saying to each other. The play thus

calls for the audience to accept that there are two languages present on stage, with the native Irish speaking in Gaelic, even though the actors are actually speaking their lines in English.

*The Communication Cord* (1982)

Critics have often noted that when a particular Friel play meets with both critical and commercial success he invariably then writes another work that satirizes the themes of the earlier play. The third Friel play produced by Field Day, *The Communication Cord*, is widely regarded as a retaliatory response to the success of *Translations*. *The Communication Cord* is a complicated sexual farce involving several couples wherein Friel relentlessly parodies both academia and the tendency to treat the Irish past with an overly reverent attitude. As Christopher Murray points out, “Friel was determined to demolish a sentimental rhetoric rendering sacred all that belonged to tradition.”

The plot centers on the character of Tim Gallagher, a junior lecturer in linguistics, who is borrowing his friend Jack’s cottage so he can pretend to his girlfriend’s father (the corrupt Senator Donovan, a local politician of the “comely maidens dancing on the village green”

variety) that he in fact owns the property and is responsible for its restoration. Tim is writing a thesis on “Discourse Analysis with Particular Reference to Response Cries,” and one of the many ironies running through the play is that his character is woefully inarticulate except in the context of discussing his thesis. Confusion and chaos abound, with every character at some point confused with another or assumed to be what they are not. As is characteristic of Friel, this confusion is achieved through linguistic descriptions and failure of communication. The farce ends with the roof of the cottage literally falling down on top of Gallagher.

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*Making History* (1988)

*Making History* was the first play that Friel wrote for Field Day since their successful and popular production of *The Communication Cord*. In this drama Friel captures the last moments of the dying Gaelic culture at the close of the sixteenth-century and examines how history has remembered Hugh O’Neill, the Earl of Tyrone, one of the last Gaelic lords of Ulster. The play retells the events leading up to and following the watershed Battle of Kinsale (1601), an abortive rebellion against the English crown. Friel is primarily concerned with dismantling the mythology that grew up around O’Neill after he left Ireland in 1607 with Rory O’Donnell, the Earl of Tyrconnell and other Irish aristocrats in what became known as “The Flight of the Earls.” Their abandonment of Ireland in the wake of defeat has been seen by historians as paving the way for the plantation of Ulster.

**FIELD DAY THEATRE COMPANY PRESENTS**  
*Making History*  
 BY **BRIAN FRIEL**

CAST  
**EMMA DEWHURST**  
**PETER GOWEN**  
**CLARE HOLMAN**  
**NIALL O'BRIEN**  
**STEPHEN REA**  
**NIALL TOIBIN**  
 DIRECTOR  
**SIMON CURTIS**  
 SET DESIGN  
**JULIAN MCGOWAN**  
 COSTUME DESIGN  
**MARTIN CHITTY**  
 LIGHTING DESIGN  
**RORY DEMPSTER**

Field Day Theatre Company gratefully acknowledges financial assistance from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and An Chomhairle Ealaíon (The Arts Council)

**DERRY, THE GUILDHALL**  
 PREVIEW: MONDAY 19 SEPTEMBER at 8.00 p.m.  
 WORLD PREMIERE TUES. 20 SEPTEMBER 1988  
 and nightly to SAT. 24 SEPTEMBER at 8.00 p.m.  
 Booking: Rialto Box Office, Tuesday – Saturday 1.00 p.m. – 5.00 p.m. TEL: (0504) 260516  
 Quaver Records – TEL: (0504) 265907

Photograph courtesy of The Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

A central character in the play is Archbishop Peter Lombard, a friend of O'Neill's and a Catholic cleric writing a history of O'Neill. Archbishop Lombard was concerned with writing a nationalist narrative, erasing the complexities and contradictions of O'Neill's personality including the fact that O'Neill was fostered out to England as a boy, where he spent seven in the home of Sir Henry Sidney. In the official biography that Archbishop Lombard is constructing, O'Neill's ties to the English aristocracy are minimized, as is the fact that O'Neill ended his life as a destitute alcoholic in exile in Rome.

In contrast, Friel creates a hero who is both romantic and flawed and, unlike Archbishop Lombard narrative, the play explores the relationship between O'Neill and his young wife Mable whom he married in 1591. Mable, who was O'Neill's third wife, was a Protestant of planter stock, whose union with the Catholic O'Neill complicates his status as a nationalist hero. In his analysis of this play, Roche draws attention to the fact that Friel restores Mabel's importance and in so doing, he builds up "the centrality of the marriage to an understanding of the wider political/ cultural dynamic between Ireland and England."

#### *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990)

In his biggest international success, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), a Donegal family of five sisters is on the verge of disintegration as the livelihood of their home knitting cottage industry is threatened with extinction due to the industrialization of the area. The play is dedicated to "those five brave Glenties women," a reference to Friel's mother and her sisters who grew up in Glenties. Poverty, the absence of choice, and the difficulties of adapting to modern life are at the heart of this serious drama that chronicles the destruction of the Mundy family's way of life. The play was an international success and enjoyed an extended run on Broadway, while a subsequent film version directed by Pat O'Connor and starring Meryl Streep and Michael Gambon was released in 1998.



Photograph courtesy of The Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

The central character, Kate Mundy, is the eldest of five sisters who live together in their family home with Michael, the illegitimate seven year-old son of the youngest sister, Rose. The sisters' uneventful lives are disrupted on the return of their beloved brother, Father Jack, from the missions in Uganda. Once again, the theme of the tragic homecoming (which resulted in the death of Frank in *Faith Healer*) underpins the drama. Father Jack returns home in a state of mental confusion after some unspecified transgression, and the sisters' efforts of maintaining their respectable lives in the village are upended by their brother's return. It becomes clear that the brother they regarded as a "saint" had a tainted past, and Kate, the only bread-winner in the family, finds her teaching job imperiled because of Jack's dismissal. There are some hints that Father Jack's improper conduct may have involved a close relationship with his houseboy Okawa, and Marine Pelletier suggests that this undertone "may echo the various scandals that affected the Irish Catholic Church in the early 1990s [which] contributed to the Church's loss of moral authority."

The sisters long to escape the rural pieties and conventions of their small village, and this desire is given expression in what Seamus Heaney has described as "one of the great scenes of twentieth-century theatre," which is "that moment in *Dancing at Lughnasa* where the Mundy sisters go wild to the sound of the céilí band coming amplified and ecstatic out of their battery wireless." There have been numerous interpretations of the significance of this scene, with the wildness of the dance in stark contrast to the typically guarded behaviour of

the Mundy sisters. It can be viewed as a temporary escape from the confines of their lives, an elegiac dance of defiance in the face of impending change, and also as a simple expression of their desire for happiness and fun. One can also view their dance as the temporary escape from the dictates of faith, given the tension between Christianity and paganism that runs through the play.

Although initially staged in 1990, the memory that the story revolves around is set in the 1960s, when the adult character of Michael is remembering back to his childhood with his mother and his aunts in 1936. Michael is trying to articulate the significance of the events he remembers from that fateful summer when Father Jack returned home. Eamonn Jordan writes that “in a way the drama is about the impossibility of fully accessing, resuscitating, processing or purging memory.” As O’ Toole points out, “Friel’s great originality lay in the way he treated public history as if it were private memory – as a construct whose truth does not lie in its mere facts.” O’Toole considers the central idea at the heart of Friel’s work to be “that our sense of what happened in the past owes more to our imaginations than it does to our memories.”

### **The Late Plays**

Many of Friel’s later work such as *Wonderful Tennessee* (1983), *Molly Sweeney* (1994), and *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* (1997) are less critically or commercially successful, and as a result are less likely to be revived in Dublin, London or New York. As noted above, many critics view these plays as responses to earlier, more commercially successful plays, although Anthony Roche argues that “while they are to some degree conscious of the plays that precede them, they would benefit at least as much from being seen as enabling the plays that followed.”

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Photograph courtesy of The Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

More recently, *The Home Place* (2005), which is set in 1878 against the resurgence of the Home Rule movement in Ireland, is another historical tragedy depicting the British plantation of Ireland as a chronic misreading of the land and its people. Set in Ballybeg at the Big House of Christopher Gore, his son David and their housekeeper, Margaret (whom they both love), *The Home Place* illustrates the clash between two ideologies, British imperialism and Irish nationalism. It also tackles the issue of who gets to claim an Irish identity as the hibernicised Christopher does, and who is the arbitrator of that claim. Although raised in Donegal, Christopher spent his childhood summers in Kent, England. Because of this and his status as an Anglo-Irish landowner, Con O’ Donovan (a local youth with links to political activists in the area) demands that he leave his estate and return to England. This challenge to the family is prompted by the arrival of Christopher’s cousin from England, Dr. Richard Gore. Dr. Gore and his assistant are visiting Ireland to conduct a “scientific study” of the native Irish. Specifically, the pair is measuring people’s physical characteristics, and as Martine Pelletier notes, Friel uses anthropology and anthropometry as a metaphor to address “contemporary concerns with globalization, genetics and new markers of identity.” Pelletier also reads *The Home Place* as interrogating “Anglo-Irish relations in the wake of the Good Friday Agreement and the amendments to the Irish constitution.” The play was enthusiastically received. After a successful run in Dublin, the play transferred to London’s West End, where it won *The Evening Standard Award* for best play. Thereafter it was produced in the US at The Guthrie Theatre in 2007.

## Field Day

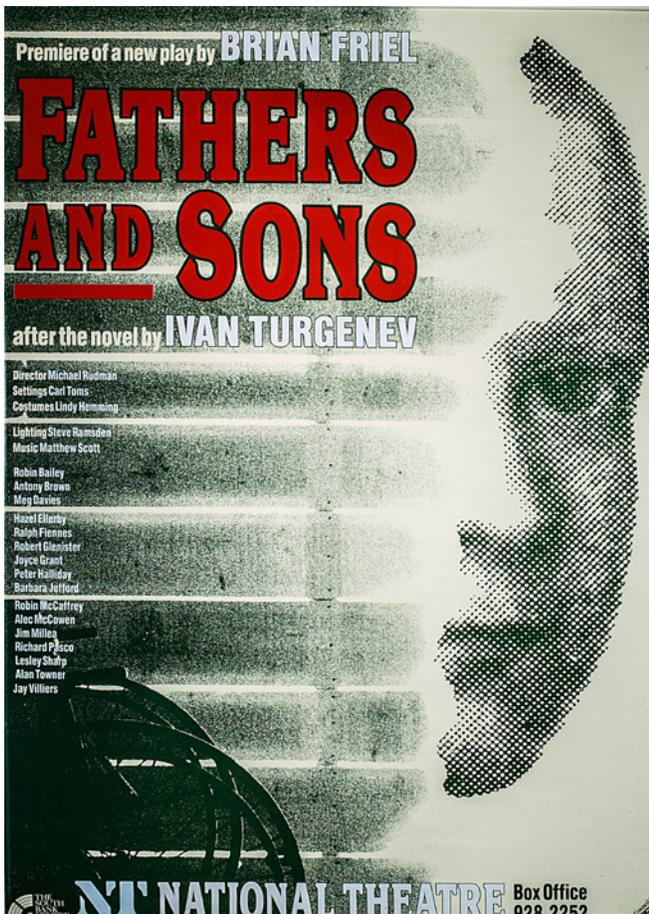
Founded in 1980 by a group of Northern Irish artists and intellectuals, the Field Day Theatre Company was intended to make Derry and the North in general a vital center for theatre and the arts. It was also an attempt to aesthetically respond to the growing political turmoil in Northern Ireland since the outbreak of violence a decade earlier “in a manner which seemed to them socially, morally and creatively responsible.”<sup>ii</sup> The idea was to create an imaginative “fifth province” of Ireland, which would rise above the political realities of the geographic divide of the island into the southern provinces of Munster, Connaught and Leinster, and the northern province of Ulster. The company created a mandate to explore questions of history, language, culture and nationality through its theatrical work, while its more overtly political interventions were in the form of the Field Day pamphlets on literature and colonialism, none of which Friel authored. In 1991 three volumes of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* were published under general editor Seamus Deane, and a fourth volume on Irish women writers was subsequently published after vocal protestations about the lack of adequate representation of women’s writing in the earlier volumes.

Both Friel and the actor Stephen Rea were the driving force behind the company’s creation (the name “Field Day” is a play on their surnames), and they were soon joined by critic Seamus Deane, poet Seamus Heaney, musician David Hammond and the poet and critic Tom Paulin. As discussed earlier in this essay, the company’s initial production was the

enormously successful *Translations*, which opened in the Guildhall in Derry and subsequently toured in several other Irish towns both north and south of the border. As Marilyn Richterik notes in her essay on Field Day, “the impulse behind the project was thus both populist, in that Friel and Rea were reaching out to new audiences of people who did not usually have the opportunity to attend professional theatre, and parochial in a positive sense.” Friel ended his association with Field Day in 1994 when he resigned from its Board of Directors. There are several reasons why the Field Day Theatre Company ceased staging new plays after Friel’s translation of *Uncle Vanya* in 1995, including the fact that the company never succeeded in acquiring a permanent home that could rival the Lyric Theatre in Belfast or the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. Moreover, by the early 1990s all of its founding directors were engaged in pursuing their own careers which took them away from the geographic confines of Derry. However, as Murray points out, its rich legacy was that “Field Day made cultural nationalism a live issue once again in Ireland, North and South, and turned the ‘narrow ground’ of factionalism into an imaginative playground.”

## The Russian Influence

In addition to his own work, Friel’s reputation as a master dramatist rests on his translation and interpretation of several Russian masters, most notably, Ivan Turgenev and Anton Chekhov. Specifically, he wrote versions of two Chekhov



Photograph courtesy of The Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

plays, *Three Sisters* (1981) and *Uncle Vanya* (1998), and two adaptations of Turgenev; a stage version of Turgenev's novel, *Fathers and Sons* (1987), and his play, *A Month in the Country* (1992). More recently he adapted Chekhov's 1899 short story, "Lady with Lapdog," into a play *The Yalta Game* (2001), which critic Charles Spencer hailed as "a beautifully judged miniature masterpiece." Friel explained his interest in nineteenth-century Russian literature thus:

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.

Many critics regard his 1979 play, *Aristocrats*, as "a Russian play in all but its Irish setting," and Field Day staged his version of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* for their second touring production. Friel did not speak Russian, so instead worked with several English and American translations of the play to construct a version written in a Hiberno-English dialect.

For a detailed discussion on Friel and the process of translation and reinterpretation involved in his adaptation of Chekhov, a podcast is available of Professor Nicholas Grene's recent lecture, "Brian Friel: A Life in Translation" at: [www.trinityjolt.com/index.php/2015/brian-friel-a-life-in-translation](http://www.trinityjolt.com/index.php/2015/brian-friel-a-life-in-translation).<sup>iii</sup>



Photograph courtesy of The Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

### Conclusion

For over fifty years Friel explored the spiritual and social upheavals of an emerging modern Ireland through stories and dramas about ordinary people. Often, his characters do not fully comprehend the effects on their lives of the historical, social and economic factors that are their inheritance. He has created some of the greatest roles for Irish actors in contemporary theatre, while remaining steadfast in his investigation of his major themes – the role of history and memory in our lives, exile and the search for home, the importance of language and how we use it to communicate. Speaking about Friel on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, Heaney began by considering Ballybeg, Friel's fictional home, which the poet likened to a crystal into which the playwright gazed to discover his vision of reality. According to Heaney, "what he witnesses when he gazes is, on the one hand, a pageant of actual, historical Irish time and place, and on the other, an imagined procession of solitary Irish selves, a multitude of faces and places appearing and disappearing like the shades in Dante's underworld."

Writing about the affinity that Friel felt for his tragic, vulnerable characters, O'Toole aptly summed up the playwright's legacy:-

In his best plays, people discover that the world they think is theirs has (often literally) no place for them. They are about to disappear. But the magic of the theatre in the hands of a magus like Friel is that this disappearance can be delayed indefinitely. People can be held, in all their confusion, in a kind of suspended animation that defies their doom."

*The Irish Times* October 3 2015.

In response to a question from Desmond Rushe in 1970, “Why do you think people go to the theatre?” Friel gave the following answer: “I don’t think they’re going any longer simply for entertainment. They want to be engaged mentally, and if the dramatist does this he is succeeding.” Yet while Friel believed that the theatre must be “a laboratory of questioning and scrutiny and of untried thoughts and practices,” he also acknowledged in later life that “laughter and merrymaking and wit and comedy and raucous fun and plain ordinary giddiness and silly giggling must be accommodated and indeed encouraged.” In his view, “a solemn theatre is a dead theatre.”<sup>iv</sup> These recent observations were made in the context of the grand opening of the new Lyric Theatre in Belfast in May 2011. Friel, who was eight-two at the time, made a rare public speech to mark the occasion in the form of a number of “secular prayers” that he offered to the audience. It is appropriate to conclude this essay with the words of the man who dedicated his life to the theatre:

And finally, a heartfelt prayer for all the creative people who will work here in the coming decades and donate their lives to that strange and almost sacred pursuit we call theatre – because donating their lives is what they do. I pray that they will find their reward in putting us in touch again with our heedless souls, of lifting the veil again on those neglected values that we need to embrace if we are to be fully human. I solemnly pray that they will find great, great reward in that unique venture.

### **Suggested Reading<sup>v</sup>**

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Roche, Anthony. *Brian Friel: Theatre and Politics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

---*Contemporary Irish Drama: From Beckett to McGuinness*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1994.

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...*The Cambridge Companion to Brian Friel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

The Brian Friel Papers are located in the National Library of Ireland (Leabharlann Náisiúnta na hÉireann): [www.nli.ie/pdfs/msslists/frielb.pdf](http://www.nli.ie/pdfs/msslists/frielb.pdf) Collection List No. 73 (MSS 37, 041-37, 806).

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The Gallery Press, in association with Faber and Faber, looks forward to publishing this year the Collected Plays of Brian Friel in five volumes, the first to appear in April.

## Collected Plays

### Volume One

The Enemy Within Philadelphia, Here I Come!  
The Loves of Cass McGuire Lovers: Winners and Losers  
Crystal and Fox The Gentle Island

### Volume Two

The Freedom of the City Volunteers Living Quarters  
Aristocrats Faith Healer Translations

### Volume Three

Three Sisters (after Chekhov) The Communication Cord  
Fathers and Sons (after Turgenev) Making History  
Dancing at Lughnasa

### Volume Four

The London Vertigo (after Macklin) A Month in the Country  
(after Turgenev) Wonderful Tennessee Molly Sweeney  
Give Me Your Answer, Do!

### Volume Five

Uncle Vanya (after Chekhov) The Yalta Game (after Chekhov)  
The Bear (after Chekhov) Afterplay Performances  
The Home Place Hedda Gabler (after Ibsen)

<sup>i</sup> All photographs included in this essay are from the Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives, John J. Burns Library, Boston College, or from the photographer's private collection, as indicated on the copyright credits.

<sup>ii</sup> Richtarik, Marilyn. "The Field day Theatre Company." In *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*.

<sup>iii</sup> Professor Grene's most recent publication is *Home on the Stage*, a study of domestic spaces in modern drama, which was published by Cambridge University Press in 2014: <http://www.cambridge.org/ch/academic/subjects/arts-theatre-culture/british-theatre/home-stage-domestic-spaces-modern-drama>

<sup>iv</sup> Brian Friel, "'Secular Prayers' for the New Lyric Theatre Belfast," in *New Hibernia Review: Íris Éireannach Nua*, Volume 19, No. 3 autumn 2015.

<sup>v</sup> For a comprehensive listing of Friel's published works, consult the bibliography in Anthony Roche's *Brian Friel: Theatre and Politics*, listed above in the suggested reading.

# In conversation with Marina Carr with an introduction by Melissa Sihra

by Adrienne Leavy

## Beauty Beyond the Everyday

By Melissa Sihra

A feeling for place lies at the heart of the theatre of Marina Carr. Hovering between memory and imagination, between literary allusion and topographic realism her plays incorporate spaces that are never fully real and never purely fictional where 'every barrow and rivulet and bog hole' resonates with visceral energy.<sup>1</sup> From Pullagh and Mucklagh, to Belmont, Lilliput Lake and Mohia Lane in the Midlands Carr's childhood terrain is one of the most formative aspects of her dramatic vision. Within this rich symbolic realm of otherness cultural notions of femininity, motherhood and the family are explored. *The Mai* (Abbey 1994) is inspired by Pallas Lake where Carr grew-up and is set on the banks of fictional Owl Lake. *Portia Coughlan* (Abbey 1996), with its genesis in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, is located in the Offaly village of Belmont while *By the Bog of Cats...* (Abbey 1998) takes place upon the shape-shifting seams of the dark Bog of Allen. Bodies of water occur with frequency in Carr's plays and offer alternative realms of expression and refuge beyond the confines of the home for the central female characters. Owl lake is a source of myth, renewal and death while the Belmont River is a literal and figurative counter-agent to the oppressive forces within land-locked Offaly in *Portia Coughlan* as it erodes the boundaries of the male-owned farmlands, breaking fences and powerfully redefining the contours of patriarchy.

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Like the work of earlier Irish playwrights of the 20th Century such as Margaret O'Leary and Teresa Deevy, Carr explores female disaffection in terms of motherhood, the family and society, where the oppressiveness of patriarchy is set against questions of women's agency. Self-exile is one of the key themes of Carr's theatre where the domestic sphere fails to offer the refuge and regeneration that each woman attains in the outside world. In *The Mai*, Carr explores one-hundred years of Irish women's history through the four generations of seven female characters ranging in age from 100 year old Grandma Fraochlan to 16 year old Millie. Addressing topics such as divorce, abortion and women's sexuality, lyrical memories intersect with social histories in a play that was ground-breaking for the time when, as Carr notes, 'there were not many plays with women characters.'<sup>2</sup> *Portia Coughlan* (1996) focuses on the life and death of thirty-year old Portia and her alienation from the socially prescribed roles of wife and mother. Nature and the outdoors are set in contrast to the insufferable enclosure of the home. *Portia Coughlan* was commissioned by Ireland's National Maternity Hospital and ironically radically challenges culturally ingrained notions of the 'maternal instinct' and oppressive patriarchy within the home and society at large. Portia connects to realms of inner creativity in her association with the beauty of the natural world. Her plea for spaces of possibility

1. Marina Carr, *By the Bog of Cats...*, (Meath: Gallery Press, 1998), p. 56.

2. Marina Carr Play-reading, Trinity College, Dublin, 12th June 2014.

beyond the 'livin' hell' of 'her life within the home'<sup>3</sup> is expressed in her intimate connection with the landscape.<sup>4</sup> Identifying with the cyclical rhythms of the birds, animals, fish, trees, and the Belmont River, Portia attains a sense of fulfilment unavailable elsewhere. Nature and the outdoors signify freedom and expression unlike the living-death of domesticity - 'all these wooden duurs and floors, sometimes I feel I'm being buried alive'.<sup>5</sup> Portia has never left the Belmont Valley and lives vicariously through the flight and return of the creatures around her as well as the constant ebb and swell of the river: 'Oh I'm sure I'd live through what other folks calls holidays, but me mind'd be turnin' on the Belmont River. Be wonderin' was it flowin' rough or smooth, was the bank mucky nor dry, was the salmon beginnin' their rowin' for the sea, was the frogs spawnin' the waterlillies, had the heron returned, be wonderin' all of these and a thousand other wonderins' that the river washes over me.' Portia's heightened sensibility manifests when she is addressing nature, where the birds, animals and river are extensions of her identity. Reflecting upon the cyclical journey of the salmon in the Belmont River, we can hear how her speech, with its stress upon the letter 's' and repeated 'sh' sounds, onomatopoeically expresses the fishes' very motion, conveying meaning through sound and symbolising the transformation and renewal that she seeks through the expressions of their mobility:

Ya chan hear tha salmon goin' up river if ya listen well enough, strugglin' for tha Shannon, an' up into tha mouh a' tha sae an' from there a slow cruise home ta tha spawnin' grounds a' th'Indian Ocean.

In *Portia Coughlan* landscape and language reflect the emotions of the female protagonist through the setting and phonetic Midlands dialect. Language both shapes, and is shaped by, place and landscape and we can hear this in Carr's lyrical re-writing of Standard English into a strongly-expressed Midlands dialect. Carr is the first playwright since John Millington Synge to ascribe a particular kind of dialect so closely with landscape on the Irish stage. The dialect of the first edition of *Portia Coughlan* mirrors the flat, rough, watery topography of its origin. Carr reflects how, 'The early plays were absurdist; they were Standard English. The dialect came in with *Portia Coughlan*. It is an element of the way that people in the midlands speak... it is a created world we are finally talking about. It is inspired, certainly, by where I grew up'.<sup>8</sup> Carr explains that the Offaly accent is characteristically 'slow, flat, with no t's' where the lack of standard punctuation creates a fluid monotone that mirrors both the river and the meandering state of Portia's existence.<sup>9</sup>

There are many influences on Carr's writing from Henrik Ibsen, Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neill, Shakespeare, Harold Pinter and Brian Friel to perhaps most notably, Samuel Beckett and Anton Chekhov. Carr's early plays are 'a homage to Beckett' particularly in terms of form, whilst her mature works engage on a deeper experiential level with the inner recesses of Beckett's vision.<sup>10</sup> Carr's plays are connected by the Midlands landscape and also by the Beckettian

3. Article 4.1 The Family, Irish Constitution 1937.

4. *Marina Carr: Plays One*, p. 222.

5. *Marina Carr: Plays One*

6. *Marina Carr: Plays One*, pp. 207-8.

7. Marina Carr, *Portia Coughlan*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), p. 26.

8. Marina Carr, 'Afterword', *The Dazzling Dark*, p. 311.

9. Marina Carr, Public Lecture, Great Memorial Building, Trinity College, Dublin, 29th June 1999.

10. Marina Carr unpublished interview with Melissa Sihra, Dublin, 1999.

theme of ontological repetition and ‘inactive action’ or waiting - for someone or ‘somethin’ momentous to happen.’<sup>11</sup> In Beckett and Carr the tragedy of the human condition lies in the implausible circularity of arrested development and the inherent need for transformation. With their emphasis on waiting as a through-line, all three 1990s Midlands plays can be regarded as variations on *Waiting for Godot*. The Mai spends her time waiting for her lover Robert by the window, Portia seeks the ghost of her dead brother by the banks of the Belmont River and Hester Swane in *By the Bog of Cats...* (1998) spends her nights and days roaming the bog, ‘waitin’ a lifetime for someone to return.’<sup>12</sup> For Carr and Beckett the deferral of self-fulfilment is the greatest tragedy of humankind where senseless repetition indicates a death of self. *Low in the Dark* (1989) humorously focuses upon inane repetition in order to highlight the absurdity of gendered behaviour in everyday life, while Grandma Fraochlan in *The Mai* articulates a key concern of Carr’s vision, ‘we can’t help repeatin’ Robert, we repeat and we repeat, the orchestration may be different but the tune is always the same.’<sup>13</sup>

*By the Bog of Cats...* (Abbey Theatre 1998) is a loose adaptation of Euripides’s *Medea* relocated to 1990s Celtic Tiger rural Ireland. Here Traveller Hester Swane waits endlessly for the mother who abandoned her at the age of seven and the association of woman and landscape is strongly manifest in Hester’s connection with the ungovernable bog. Shifting between house, caravan and ‘night-roaming on the bog’, Hester challenges conservative notions of Irish womanhood, illuminating the judgemental moral myopia of the settled-community. While Beckett’s plays are replete with male tramp-like characters in search of ontological accommodation and reprieve from the stasis of non-transformation, Hester lives on the margins and is similarly exilic. Landscape is central to the meaning of the play, expressing a fecund doubleness that is at once mundane and supernatural. The duality of visceral place and radical otherness that characterises the bog is a metaphor for Carr’s dramaturgy as a whole where the profound unknowability of the bog mirrors the ways in which Carr observes ‘we are as much not of this world, as we are of it.’<sup>14</sup> ‘Always ‘shiftin’ and changin’ and coddin’ the eye’ the bog is a potent purveyor of history, one vast porous grave of dead leaves reverberating with the palpable energies of, ‘All the dead voices./ They make a noise like wings. Like leaves./ Like sand./ Like leaves.’<sup>15</sup>

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In Carr’s 1990s trilogy each of the female protagonists commits suicide. While some critics have pointed out the need for ‘positive resolutions’ for women in the plays, Carr shows a contemporary society where processes of female oppression have only begun to be seriously acknowledged in the social, political and academic fora of the last decade or so, making the point that painful narratives need to be addressed before so-called ‘positive’ resolutions can be staged. Death should not be regarded literally in Carr’s work but rather, as a poetics of transition and becoming rather than closure. While it might seem more apposite to offer positive resolution, passing over the less appealing hidden histories of domestic violence and sexual abuse, paedophilia, prostitution, inequity and emotional isolation in favour of vibrancy and reconciliation, such deaths are the necessary symbolic articulations of disaffection on the pathway to accommodating female subjectivity in Irish theatre and culture.

11. *By the Bog of Cats...*, in *Marina Carr: Plays One*, p. 169.

12. *Marina Carr: Plays One*, p. 339.

13. *Marina Carr: Plays One*, p. 123.

14. *Theatre Talk*, p. 57.

15. *Waiting for Godot*, p. 58.

Carr's emergence as a playwright in the late 1980s coincided with a sense of increasing presence and visibility for Irish women - *Mna na hEireann*, in Irish culture and politics. Newly elected President Mary Robinson made a speech at the premiere of Carr's *This Love Thing* in 1991, identifying the significance of a new play by a woman at this time. For the first time in the history of the State protest and reform was taking place with regard to divorce, abortion, homosexuality, contraception and the oppressive constitutional definitions of woman as wife and mother in the home. Carr observes that, 'With the founding of the State, the imagination vanished and there began huge resistance to deep feeling and complexity.'<sup>16</sup> While Robinson was contesting restrictive legislation regarding gender and sexuality in the political forum, Carr's plays were articulating female disaffection and redressing conservative moral values on the Irish stage.

*By the Bog of Cats...* concludes the cycle of female suicide. In *On Raftery's Hill* 2000 the characters are incarcerated in a horrific cycle of repetition which Carr says, 'is worse than death.'<sup>17</sup> In this distillation of Beckettian inactive-action, incest denotes a dehumanising arrested development where 'no-body comes, no-body goes, it's awful.'<sup>18</sup> The land, farming and mutilated nature and animal-imagery run through *On Raftery's Hill* as metaphors for the tragic plight of the family within the home. Confined to the kitchen, form and content are reflexive where the characters' lack of movement to the outdoors conveys the violating incarceration of the women within the home. While the kitchen in Irish drama has come to signify an enduring association and conflation of family and nation, Carr's inversion of Augusta Gregory's and WB Yeats's *Kathleen ni Houlihan* (1902) radically de-idealises hearth and home here where generational cycles of sexual abuse continue without intervention by Church or State.

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Set on a remote hill the exegetic landscape poignantly expresses the detachment of the family from social structures, where sexual abuse is mediated through images of nature and animal cruelty. Forty-year-old Dinah processes her ongoing sexual relationship with her father through a metaphor of the surrounding pastures, 'Ud's just like children playing in a field at some awful game before laws was made.'<sup>19</sup> Self-preservatory notions of an idyllic childhood jar with the reality that Dinah was raped by her father with her mother's knowledge from the age of twelve, 'He 'used take me up the fields wud him, up on hees shoulders, thought I was a giant. I went everywhere wud him, he'd be mendin fences and I'd be playin wud me dolls beside him, or savin the hay, he'd throw me up on the haycocks and I'd roll down and he'd ketch me, taught me to fish...'<sup>20</sup> Nature offers a distancing narrative as she remembers how he, 'Taught me all the names a the trees, ash behind the house, sycamore in the Church Field, yew and oak in the Calla, sycamore, elder, blackthorn, the River Field, beech the Lower Field, beech the Haggard, beech the Fairyfort... I remember the names a trees like no wan...'<sup>21</sup> *On Raftery's Hill* presents a complex web of collusion and delusion where each character negotiates the suffering with which they are implicated behind closed doors, whether as perpetrator, victim or complicit

16. Marina Carr Play-reading, Samuel Beckett Centre, Masters' in International Performance Research Summer School, 12th June 2014.

17. *Theatre Talk*

18. *Waiting for Godot*, p. 41

19. Marina Carr, *On Raftery's Hill*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2000), p. 58.

20. *On Raftery's Hill*, p. 40.

21. *On Raftery's Hill*, p. 40.

bystander. In a rewriting of the ending of *Waiting for Godot* we see how Carr's motif of infinite repetition is rendered painfully real as the characters remain seated in the kitchen and, like the tramps, 'They do not move.'<sup>22</sup>

Psychic landscapes of the inner-world manifest in Carr's 'dream plays' - *Marble* (2009, Abbey Theatre), *The Cordelia Dream* (2009, Royal Shakespeare Company) and *The Giant Blue Hand* (2009, The Ark, Dublin) where the unconscious life powerfully determines the everyday world. In *16 Possible Glimpses* (Abbey Theatre, 2011), Carr explores her major theme of conscious-living through imagined 'glimpses' into the life of Anton Chekhov, while *Phaedra Backwards* (McCarter Theater Princeton, 2011) is a return to the Greek world in a non-geographically specific re-imagining of the Phaedra/Hippolytus myth which offers a powerful feminist renegotiation of the Aristotelian form and content of Classical tragedy. Characteristic of Carr's dramaturgy is the organic congruence of multiple realms of imaginative 'otherness' with the everyday world. A powerful materiality of alterity can be identified in the presence of dreams, ghost-figures, echoes of death, landscapes of bogs, fields, ring-forts, folk-tales and sites of water. In *Phaedra Backwards* the Minotaur-figure is a compelling embodiment of the core of Carr's work - the unknowable otherness that is plumbed within the depths of us all. Stage-directions indicate that there are 'two scores' - Phaedra's and the Minotaur's, and their dual planes shift and slide about one another throughout the drama. Half man, half beast, the Minotaur embodies intrinsic otherness and is one of many such unquantifiable figures in her work. 'Yes', he says, 'this is how I was sent into the world. All the nobility of the white bull. But unfortunately too in my mix, all the shadowy faculties of your race.'<sup>23</sup> Carr has spoken throughout her career about the tragedy of the death of the non-rational and of our need for mystery, 'No one talks about the soul anymore.'<sup>24</sup> For Carr humanity and dignity depend upon the acceptance of difference within ourselves and others. Carr's Minotaur is the soul-figure and imagination itself. Feared and desired, he is finally destroyed by patriarchal authority and while Theseus's slaying of the Minotaur has conventionally been regarded as the birth of Western civilisation, for Carr, it is 'the beginning of the end.'<sup>25</sup> Operating upon multiple-layers of meaning which serve to challenge monological ideologies of gender, place and identity, Carr's plays offer new ways to process the past and transform the future in Irish theatre and culture.

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### Biography:

Dr. Melissa Sihra is Assistant Professor of Drama at the Samuel Beckett Centre, Trinity College Dublin and former President of the Irish Society for Theatre Research (2011-2015). She is editor of *Women in Irish Drama: A Century of Authorship and Representation*, (Palgrave Macmillan), co-editor (with Paul Murphy) of *The Dreaming Body: Contemporary Irish Theatre* (Oxford University Press & Colin Smythe Ltd.) and co-editor (with Pirkko Koski) of *The Local Meets the Global in Performance* (Cambridge Scholars Press). She researches and teaches in the fields of Irish Theatre, Playwriting, Women, Gender, Sexuality and Feminism in performance and is currently completing a monograph on the theatre of Marina Carr.

22. *Waiting for Godot*

23. Marina Carr, *Phaedra Backwards*, Princeton, p. 38.

24. Marina Carr interview with Melissa Sihra, Abbey Theatre Stage, September 2011.

25. Marina Carr, public talk opening night of *Phaedra Backwards*, McCarter Theatre, Princeton, New Jersey, October 2011.



Photo copyright Yousef Khanfar

### In Conversation with Marina Carr

**A.L.** Can you briefly describe your background?

**M. C.** I grew up in County Offaly, which is the Irish Midlands. I had quite a country upbringing I suppose, a country childhood in rural Ireland; it couldn't get much better. I went to school in Gortnamona (which means "field of the bog"), and later attended boarding school in Mountmellick. I then went up to University College Dublin where I studied English and Philosophy.

**A.L.** The landscape of the Irish Midlands plays a significant role in some of your early work. For example *The Mai* (1994)<sup>i</sup> is set by Owl Lake, *Portia Coughlan* (1996) is set by the Belmont River, and *By the Bog of Cats* (1998) is set near a bog. How important is the idea of "place" to your work?

**M.C.** I think I've moved away from the Midlands a good while ago, to be honest. It doesn't mean I won't come back to it, but I kind of wrote what I needed to. The work takes you elsewhere and you just follow that, it's not like there is any great plan or anything. Certainly place was a very powerful influence on me; obviously where you are from, the sounds of childhood, they stay with you, whatever that sound is, the way people talk, their particular phrasing, that sort of thing stays with you for good really. It's a well you can draw on. And then the landscape of Offaly is quite beautiful; I grew up on a beautiful lake called Pallas Lake, and I remember in the summer all the beautiful lanes and the bogs, all of that.

**A.L.** Although every movement on stage is significant, the verbal aspect of your theatre dominates, with conversations simultaneously suggesting violence and black comedy. How difficult is it to achieve this multi-layered tone?

**M.C.** It's great you are picking up on the humor because you want the comedy to be there also. I think it's a very Irish characteristic. We have a very black sense of humor and we are very conversant with the grotesque and the violent and also the comedy of the human predicament. Its part of our nature I think.

**A.L.** When you begin a new play do you work out the structure in advance or does that evolve during the writing process?

**M.C.** When I was a younger playwright I would have had some sort of structure and wouldn't always stick to it. But now I tend not to at all. I tend to spend more time thinking about it before I start writing. I don't necessarily want to nail down the structure in advance. A lot of the plays I draw on would come with elements of a plot which I might not use, but I would have a fair idea of how these elements might translate into something else or how I might riff on them.

**A.L.** An overriding theme in your work seems to be the conviction that humanity keeps repeating destructive patterns of behaviour despite our attempts to the contrary. Would you agree with this assessment?

**M.C.** Yes, I suppose so. We do seem to have to learn the same lesson over and over again. We are still asking the big questions without really answering them; how to live really, trying to find out what's virtue, what's truth, what's civilization, what's law.

**A.L.** As a follow on to the above question, are you consciously trying to put a social message across in your plays?

**M.C.** I don't know if I am. I often think that the writer's job is to write and then other people come along and find whatever it is in the work. So if there is a message, it wouldn't be deliberate; if it's there it's there. I'd prefer for things to be more open. We don't really need to know all the answers. My plays are about people and how they are behaving and what they are doing and how that shapes the way they live or don't live. Character would always be my theme, so I wouldn't try and convey a big message idea in my work, or what I consider to be an idea, as ideas are incredibly abstract, and people are not abstract. We are flesh and bone and not terribly rational creatures, we are sentient creatures, we feel everything first. I find the older I get it's the language that pulls me along, and if I find a particular metaphor or image and start chasing it down, that becomes plot as much as anything else.

**A.L.** Brian Friel once said that he had "a strong belief in racial memory." This idea is also present in some of Thomas Kinsella's poetry where he incorporates material from *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (*The Book of the Taking of Ireland* or *The Book of Invasions*). Would you agree with this idea?

**M.C.** It's a fabulous idea really, racial memory, and I think we all have it. You don't realize what you know and what's in there, what's in the hard wiring in all of us. We all speak English here, so the idea of the vanished language of Ireland would be one aspect of racial memory. Its part of what we are carrying down in our blood, absolutely. If you look at physically, genetically, what's passed down in families and then there are all the things you can't see. There are all the behavioral patterns, the familial and the racial behaviors. That whole Platonic idea of the form and its representation, and it's all mimesis and replication and we are all constantly looking for the original. We look for it in our lives; we look for it in theatre, we look for it in poetry and art, in beauty. Think of the old Irish laments and how they affect you; often you don't understand why something affects you the way it does, but it is like the past calling you.

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**A.L.** In *Portia Coughlan* a course of action set in motion in the distant past works its way through to the present with tragic consequences. Portia's suicide in act two seems inevitable, and makes perfect sense in the context of her obsession with her dead twin Gabriel, who drowned when he was fifteen. Did you have this in mind when you began working on the play or did Portia's fate evolve as you were writing?

**M.C.** That was actually a quite formal exercise. I wanted to see what would happen if I put the end of the play in the middle, how that would inform the actual end of the play. I had the beginning, the end, and the middle, in three acts and I found that it worked for me very effectively. I learned a lot of things. That collapsing of time, the way of playing with the past and the present, I found that just lovely, it just made it much richer. That ending would not have worked at the end of this play as it would have been too much; the fact of bringing her back alive in act three knowing that she is dead just added layers of resonance to the play.

**A.L.** In *The Mai*, *Portia Coughlan*, *By the Bog of Cats*, and more recently *Hecuba* (2015), the dramatic representation of female characters is characterized not only by passion, but also by anger and rage over their cultural and political marginalization. Is this theme necessarily present when you begin writing a new play?

**M.C.** A little bit; however, I have to say that the way I write, I have never written one line that I considered being from the margins, and yet in all of the commentary around women's writing, the assumption is that you are writing from the margins, and I absolutely reject that. The whole ghettoization of women; the idea that there is "literature" and then there is "women's literature," is offensive. It's very difficult in this climate because it's so condescending. You are left with no recourse; it's out there and that is the way you are judged. The insinuation is that you are something less than a playwright, which again is something I absolutely reject. You just realize it won't be sorted out in my lifetime or in my daughter's lifetime. Perhaps in five hundred years or so.

**A.L.** Do you think that the violent acts that permeate many of your plays, i.e., infanticide, suicide, incest and attempted rape, are less controversial from the perspective of the audience if the play has a basis in mythology, such as *By the Bog of Cats and Ariel* (2002), as opposed to the contemporary Irish world of *Portia Coughlin* and *On Raftery's Hill* (2000)<sup>12</sup>?

**M.C.** No, I don't think a mythic distance provides a lot more comfort actually. It might soften the rage, but generally I find not, because the stories are so powerful and so immediate. There is a Medea, a Hecuba, and a Clytemnestra in many of us so their emotions resonate with audiences.

**A.L.** In Euripides' *Hecuba*, the Trojan Queen is represented as blinding King Polymester and killing his two sons after he fails to protect Hecuba's young son from the victorious Agamemnon. In your version you do not follow this story line, and Hecuba is portrayed more sympathetically, with her grief over the death of her son Polydorus and daughter Polyxena eventually driving her mad. What was the impetus behind your re-working of this myth?

**M.C.** I just thought she got bad press. The idea of her killing her grandchildren; I actually can't see how she would have done it. When the Greeks were writing these plays in 500 BC they were trying to invent themselves. They were trying to sort out what is the ideal state, which included what was the function of women. And Hecuba and the other Greek women had to be corralled. It is a conversation that persists down through the centuries. I love Euripides, he is a wonderful writer, and because it's a wonderful play it's sort of set in stone. But he was writing his version of a myth, and what do you do with just one version? Yet somehow all these archetypes of females are in western consciousness; they are types of women to be feared, they are kind of monsters at the outer reach of femininity and they are all terrifying. This terrible fear of women, the societal need to control and marginalize them, still persists.

**A.L.** In the play *On Raftery's Hill* the central character is Red Raftery, a much more dominant and dangerous personality than either Robert in *The Mai* or Carthage Kilbride and Xavier Cassidy in *By the Bog of Cats*. Was it a different experience to create such a strong male character in light of the fact that your earlier plays focused on strong female characters?

**M.C.** Yes, it was lovely to do that. The older I get the more I like writing really strong male characters; they are fairly complex individuals.

**A.L.** You write at a high intellectual level, yet your audience may not necessarily be as well versed in the source material for many of your plays. Does the problem of communication with your audience worry you as a playwright?

**M.C.** A lot of the time you do worry, but the play should work anyway. I raid sources from everywhere, but it has to translate here and now, it has to be understandable, it has to be played by actors and it has to be felt. So the play should work regardless. It would worry me if I ever got too far away from that, unless it was a deliberate strategy on my part.

**A.L.** *By the Bog of Cats* was first produced by the Abbey Theatre in 1998 and was revived last year. Was there any discernible difference in the way the play was produced in 2015? Was the audience reaction different and if so why do you think that was?

**M.C.** Yes, there were huge differences in the production right across the board, and the audience reaction was also very different. I think the reason for that is because the play has been around for quite some time now, a lot of people had read the play and had been taught it, but hadn't seen it, so there was quite a bit of anticipation. And the reception was ecstatic; the audience for the most recent production just adored it, which was lovely to see. It takes a long time for a play to land, and some never land, just simply fade away quietly. I was so grateful, and relieved to be honest, that it had managed to survive after seventeen or eighteen years. The fact that it still seems to work for audiences was lovely to have affirmed for me as a writer.

**A.L.** The main character in *By the Bog of Cats* is Hester Swane, an itinerant living on a bog, who at the age of seven is abandoned by her mother Big Josie. The play exposes the undercurrent of discrimination for the travelling community in Ireland, and parallels could be drawn with the current worldwide migrant crisis. Would you agree, and if so, do you think the audience at the recent Abbey revival would have drawn this parallel?

**M.C.** Well no matter what age we are in you will always have people displaced out of their lives, their homes, and we are all capable as communities of doing this, through badness but mainly by indifference. It's terrifying to watch, and then you have to ask yourself the question, if I were there, which person would I be? It's very hard to be different from those around you. We are tribal and deeply conservative by nature; we like to keep people in their place, we don't like difference, so we take it very hard when we have to open up to people. But again, you have to ask yourself, which one would I be?

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**A.L.** Tom MacIntyre sees a connection between your work and that of William Faulkner, and I see an affinity with the Southern Gothic of Flannery O'Connor in that many of your plays are characterized by the juxtaposition of fierce black comedy, elements of the grotesque and a tenderness untainted by sentimentality. Can you comment?

**M.C.** Well, I love all the Southern writers, and the gothic, almost demented aspect of their work. Faulkner I adore, and then there is O'Connor and Capote, and also Eudora Welty, who was a little more restrained and classical than the others but still a beautiful writer. Yeah, those Southerners.....

**A.L.** You have described *Sixteen Possible Glimpses* (2011) as being inspired by your reading of the life and work of Anton Chekhov, whom you describe as "an enormous influence" on you. Brian Friel often spoke of his affinity with the Russian playwrights and I am wondering if you ever saw his "Chekhovian" plays, *Living Quarters* (1977), and *Aristocrats* (1979), or Friel's translations of *Three Sisters* (1981) and *Uncle Vanya* (1988)? If so what was your reaction? Also, did you ever have the opportunity to discuss Chekhov's legacy with Friel?

**M.C.** We never actually spoke about Chekhov but I did see some of Friel's adaptations and I love his work. Thomas Kilroy and Frank McGuinness would be other Irish playwrights influenced by Chekhov. I think there is an affinity between the Russian soul and the Irish soul. The thing about Irish playwrights is that we get Chekhov, you know, the big mad family being stuck in the country. There is something about the Irish way of looking at the world and the Russian way of looking at the world that is similar.

**A.L.** In an interview with Mike Murphy for *Reading The Future*<sup>iii</sup> you spoke about your admiration for Tennessee Williams in particular. You have reworked various Greek myths and plays, for example *By the Bog of Cats* is your version of Euripides' tragedy *Medea*, *Ariel* (2002) is loosely based on Euripides' *Iphigenia*, *Phaedra Backwards* (2011) retells the Phaedra Myth, and *Hecuba* is a sympathetic look at the Trojan Queen. Would you ever consider re-telling *A Streetcar Named Desire* or *The Glass Menagerie* in a contemporary Irish context?

**M.C.** God no! I wouldn't dare. He's too close and his work is perfect. An adaptation of Williams would be sacrilege. Why would you?

**A.L.** Your most recently published play, *Indigo* (2015), which was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company and came about through a workshop with the director Mikel Mrufi, is a dark tale of passion among fairies, mythical creatures and humans. The lyrical quality and rich imagery throughout suggest a prose poem, while the epic narrative and fabulous elements are reminiscent of the Old English poem *Beowulf*. Were you consciously trying to write a prose poem?

**M.C.** I'm waiting for a production date from the RSC, and it should be produced next year. No, I didn't have *Beowulf* in mind; it's just the way it came out. I started writing and it just kind of unfurled. It kept unfurling and I had my heart in my mouth. You can spend a lot of time as a writer digging, and then sometimes you are given a gift. It sort of came to me with a fabulous ease.

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**A.L.** Another work that comes to mind when reading *Indigo* is W.B. Yeats's poem, "The Stolen Child," where the supernatural is represented as alluring but also threatening. Was this poem relevant when you were writing the play?

**M.C.** Not necessarily, but I love Yeats. He is just magnificent. In a way everything you ever read is relevant whether you can remember reading it or not

**A.L.** Your work has been translated and performed in several European countries as well as in the United States. Are there discernible differences in the international productions of your plays?

**M.C.** I don't have much input because they are translated. I have been invited to a few productions on the continent, and I notice they are a lot more sensual, more physical. I watched a production of *Marble* in Rome, which sounded beautiful in Italian. Just recently I saw a Spanish production of *Marble* and again it was completely different, a joy to see and just fabulous to watch, partly I suppose because I couldn't understand a word they were saying.

**A.L.** Storytelling and language remain the bedrock of the Irish theatrical tradition. What's interesting about reading through the three volumes of your plays published to date is that one can appreciate and visualize the dramas as though reading a short story. How do you feel about people *reading* your work as opposed to seeing it performed on stage?

**M.C.** Well I'm so grateful if anyone gives any time to the work, whether it's reading the play or going to see it. I know myself I read a lot of plays; in my business you tend to read more plays than you would ever see. But it always reminds me of Ibsen, he wrote for the Christmas market, that is to sell, his plays would be bought as Christmas presents, which is just great. There is great mileage to be had from reading plays as much as seeing them, but of course, all the actors and directors disagree with me! And then a lot of people don't think a play exists until it's performed, but I'm not sure where I stand on that one.

**A.L.** In your work the dead are often as important as the living, and you have written that the writer must call on "the wisdom and circumspection needed when dealing with the dead or the past, with memory, knowledge."<sup>iv</sup> As you elaborated, "it's about the courage to sit down and face the ghosts and have a conversation with them. It's about going over to the other side and coming back with something, new, hopefully; gold, possibly."<sup>v</sup> Is your representation of the dead and the supernatural influenced in any way by the beliefs of pre-Christian Ireland?

**M.C.** I do think the dead haunt us. Life is a mystery, a complete mystery, and maybe we should bow to that a bit more as we did long ago.

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i All dates listed after specific plays refer to the year in which the work was first performed.

ii See "Reflections Across Water: New Stages of Performing Carr" in *The Theatre of Marina Carr: 'before rules were made.'* edited by Cathy Leeney & Anna McMullan. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2003.

iii *Reading the Future: Irish Writers in conversation with Mike Murphy*, Clíodhna Ní Anluain editor. Dublin: the Lilliput Press, 2000.

iv Riana O' Dwyer, "The Imagination of Women's Reality: Christina Reid and Marina Carr" in *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre* edited by Eamonn Jordan. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2000

v Ibid.

## Ferdia Mac Anna on former Abbey Theatre director Tomás Mac Anna

My dad's name was Tomás.

He was a big presence in my life but I always felt that I scarcely knew him. Then he went a few years ago. I'm still not sure if I ever found out what it was like to have a dad. He gave me no advice and rarely spoke to me in any meaningful way about anything much. But he introduced me to The Marx Brothers and Victor Borge and daft Dundalk humour and he gave me Kurt Vonnegut and Ray Bradbury and James Bond and William books and Dylan Thomas' play, *Under Milk Wood*.

Once, he came home from the US where he had been directing plays or lecturing in colleges (activities he did most summers) and handed me an LP – The Allman Brothers Band Live at the Fillmore East. It became my favourite music of all time. When I asked him how he had chosen the album, he said he'd asked the clerk in the record store what was the best LP around.



When I was 16 about to turn 17, he brought me to America with him for a summer to Carlton College, St Paul, Minnesota, where he was lecturing in Irish Drama. I don't know why he did that. We rarely discussed anything.

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However, for a few months in the USA, he was my companion. He opened gates for me into strange and different and beguiling worlds. It left me with a lifelong fascination for America, particularly the music and writers, though not for some reason, the theatre.

I was certain that there were only two things in his life he truly cared about – he loved theatre and he loved my mom. Basically, he cast his kids as extras in his love stories. If we were good he gave us walk-on parts or allowed us to deliver a few lines on the stage of his life.

When he grew up and often long before that, we were forced to go off and stage and write our own lives. I remember that after my Leaving Cert results, he didn't want me to go to college. Instead, he insisted I left home and found a job. The previous summer, he had taken me with him to the USA. Now, here he was trying to throw me out. My mother stepped in and talked him into allowing me to go to UCD, but I always felt like an imposter. Somehow, by qualifying for third level, I had offended him. He'd never gone to college. His father had died suddenly when he was 12. At 17, he had left home to work on the border as a customs

man. Maybe he just didn't know how to deal with the situation, or maybe he didn't want to spend dosh on his first born's college years. Who knows? Anyway, I went top UCD and didn't see much of him until I graduated in 1977.

Later, I will play the Allmans and think of him. In my head, perhaps I will visit the bronze statue of him that's plonked somewhere in the Abbey theatre. I might stick a lit cigarette butt into the mouth and watch as the ash mounts. He smoked at home but didn't inhale. The cigarette bobbed in his mouth when he spoke or worked on a manuscript or watched TV. We stared as the ash pillar grew and waited for it to topple but somehow, it never did. He lived a creative life for as long as he could. When his health failed and he couldn't read anymore and couldn't work with actors or create or shape theatre works, he slowly let go. When he was 83 (never sure what age he was), I helped to put him into an ambulance and he went off to hospital and he never came out. His short term memory was gone – or rather, it seemed to vanish whenever it suited him.

I visited him when I could. On one visit, he looked at me – his diminished baldy self so odd and vulnerable. 'Oh Ferdia, there you are – you're a dutiful son', he said. Then he paused and took a breath as he considered something. 'You know, these father and son things, they almost never work out. But sometimes...' his voice trailed off. After a few moments, he lapsed back into memory loss.

I never found out what he was about to say. Maybe I should have asked him. Or maybe I was content to settle for the nearest thing to a good review that I ever got from him.

### **Biography**

Ferdia Mac Anna was born in Howth, County Dublin in 1955. He is the author of three novels, *The Last of the High Kings*, *The Ship Inspector* and *Cartoon City*. For some years he toured Ireland as lead singer and songwriter with first Rocky De Valera and the Gravediggers (1977-79/2005-2009) and The Rhythm Kings (1980-83). His debut as a feature film director, *All About Eva*, an old school Film Noir revenge thriller, premiered at Dublin International Film Festival in 2014. At present, he is co-facilitator at the Innovation Academy, UCD.

# The Blood Flow Game: Violence on Stage

by Séamus Scanlon



Photo Serge Neville

This is a personal narrative about the staging of The McGowan Trilogy – interrelated violent one act plays comprising *Dancing At Lunacy*, *The Long Wet Grass* and *Boys Swam Before Me*.

The Trilogy has six characters, four male and two female, and all are killed except the antihero Victor M. McGowan - the M stands for Murder (and something else). The victims are Victor's mother, his childhood sweetheart, two IRA men and an innocent barman on his first day at work. The plays are set in 1980s Ireland in Belfast, Mayo and Galway

Victor's internal life and vitality are barren – he is rigidly governed by rules set by IRA protocol but which he embellishes with his own self-imposed rules. He is rigid in his thinking and actions. He is alive but not living.

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The plays were written to examine the fallout from paramilitary violence in Northern Ireland and the psychic and moral damage the perpetrators can pay. The mortal damage to victims is also highlighted.

## Production History.

I completed an MFA in Creative Writing at City College in New York in 2007. I thought there were too many writers in Ireland but discovered there were not as many as in New York!! I mostly wrote crime fiction and noir flash fiction which was not really in fashion in MFA circles.

In 2010 I read a story at The Tandem Reading series in the Cell Theater. The owner Nancy Manocherian happened to be there that day and heard me and approached me afterwards. She liked my story and delivery and probably my Irish accent. She asked me to submit a play if I had one. After a few weeks I sent her my first one act play *Dancing At Lunacy*. She and Kira Simring (Artistic Director of The Cell) liked it and in March 2012 they staged it as part of the Irish Cell alongside Larry Kirwan's *Blood* (which had no blood). Larry's play (he was founder of Black 47) is about

a little known event when James Connolly was abducted because he was threatening to go it alone with an uprising. It is set in Dublin in 1916 a few weeks before the Easter Rising. Mine was set around the questioning of a possible informer in a drinking club in Belfast in 1984 the day after the Brighton Bombing. Blood was cerebral and intelligent; Dancing was a married-to-mayhem violence extravaganza.

Once I saw the play on stage I knew I had to write more. I was hooked. I knew Paul Nugent 'was' VICTOR (the star of Dancing) so it was easy to write more plays with him as the central character. However I was a one hit wonder. It was the only play I had written.

I then wrote a ten minute short Boys Swam Before Me for the Pull Up Your Shorts short play festival in An Beal Bocht run by Don Creedon. It got a good reception and also was produced at Lehman College as part of Artist Without Walls.



Serge Neville and Alan Hayes - Photo Seamus Scanlon

The next break came when *The Long Wet Grass* made the NEWvember New Play Festival in Tivoli New York run by Tangent Theatre Company and AboutFace Ireland. I knew from the audience reaction that that one act had potential as well. We did a staged reading later that year at The Cell.

In the following year 2014 I tailored the three one acts (and some alternates like *Black is Black* and *My Three O'Clock*) for The Cell Theatre's submission to Origin's 1st Irish Theatre Festival of New Plays which was successful.

The final composition of *The McGowan Trilogy* involved a total rewrite of *Dancing* (one character THE CUSTOMER was dropped for example); *Boys Swam Before Me* was expanded from 10 to 30 minutes and all three one acts were modified to have threads of

narrative that linked the three. They were basically standalone pieces previously except they all featured VICTOR.

The McGowan Trilogy was staged at The Cell in Sep 2014 for 20 nights. It won awards for Best Actress (Anna Nugent), Best Director (Kira Simring) and Best Design (Gertjan Houben). The play was also published by Arlen House (2014).

In December of 2014 Olga Manonova contacted me. Her friend in Belfast Sam Millar who had endorsed the book told her about the play. Once she read it she wanted to stage it as the first play in the former Curzon Cinema which had been in disuse for decades. On a wet day (what else) I met her in Dublin with Paul Nugent (VICTOR) and Anna Nugent (WOMAN in The Long Wet Grass). All four of us were enthusiastic about a UK production. There was a lot of work in the seven months to find dates and organize the logistics. It is one of the hidden costs though if you get involved in the production side of which I tend to do. The collaborative nature of The Cell where they incubate new work gives you that opportunity. You lose sizeable writing time and you can't control the production end very easily because you are not the producer.

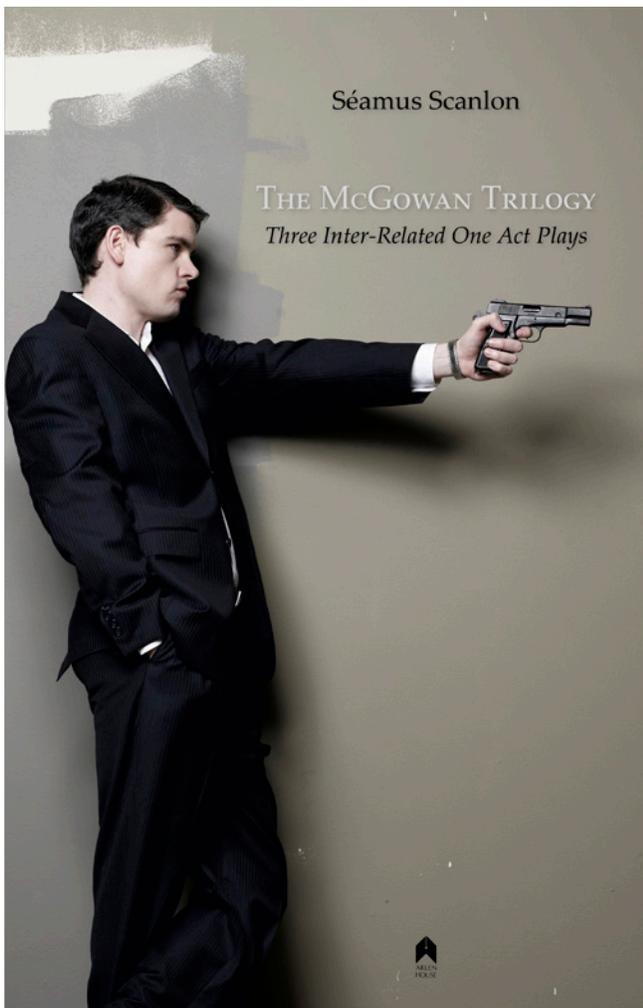


Photo: Serge Neville and Alan Hayes

In late June 2015 The Cell's artistic director Kira Simring, the Production Manger/Stage Manager Mackenzie Meeks as well as actors Paul and Anna Nugent flew to the UK. Olga had hired four UK based professional actors who were off book by the time rehearsals started which lasted just over two and a half weeks. The show sold out for the four nights from July 9-12. We probably could have sold the week out.

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Since Dancing has lines about 'shooting Brits in the head' I was not sure what the reaction would be. Dancing is also set the day after the Brighton bombing of the Tory Party annual Conference in the Grand Hotel and The Kino-Theater (in St. Leonards on Sea) is not far from Brighton. But all went well – the British audience even laughed (most nights) at the Irish black humor. What struck me the most was what little impact the Hunger Strikes and the IRA campaign had on the British mind set and consciousness.

A separate production went ahead in three theaters in Ireland during the summer of 2015 - An Taibhdherac (June 5 & 6), Westport Town Hall (August 7) and The Town Hall Galway (August 28). I was more nervous in Galway than the UK because it is my home town and the home of the Tony Award winning Druid Theatre which has a formidable pedigree and against which every playwright and theater company staging a show in Galway is very conscious about. Again we had capacity houses and favorable feedback.

In 2016 The Cell production of *The Long Wet Grass* (of *The McGowan Trilogy*) has been staged in Lehman College and the City College of New York followed by a panel discussion on violence, Northern Ireland, guerilla warfare, my writing process (I do not have one) and any issue that the audience brought up. Further venues are expected in Fall 2016. Staging *The McGowan Trilogy* in Belfast, Dublin and London are on my wish list!

#### Violence in *The McGowan Trilogy*

*The McGowan Trilogy* violence includes stabbing, physical and verbal assault, multiple shootings and a poisoning. Subsequent plays (unproduced to date) involve similar levels of violence with the addition of breaking bones with lump hammers and burning prisoners with cigarette butts. In *Treblinka* (the only play set outside Ireland) eight of the ten characters in the play are killed on stage. I am more fun in person.



Photo Jane Talbot and Luke Morgan

*Dancing At Lunacy* is a runaway train wreck of violence, punk, puns, guns and dancing (the pogo) where VICTOR kills a suspected informer, his own commanding officer and a barman. In *The Long Wet Grass* VICTOR kills a woman for a minor lapse (in IRA rules). In *Boys Swam Before Me* VICTOR kills his mother in a nursing home.

I was not familiar with the protocols that exist in the depiction of violence on stage since this was first exposure to being involved in the full production of a play from casting, reading right through to opening night. I had hoped that I could succeed because of seeing Martin McDonagh's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* in Galway in 2003 (Druid, The Town Hall) and New York in 2006 (Atlantic Theatre Company).

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It took McDonagh 9 years to have this play produced because Druid and Royal Court Theatre who had produced his other plays refused to stage it. Partly it was self-censorship by theatre companies because of the nascent Peace Process. His political message against the Irish Republican paramilitary violence was potent.

However *The Lieutenant of Inishmore's* violence is 'acceptable' to audiences because they feel secure in the knowledge that the violence is stylized and absurdist since the premise of the play is revenge for the killing of the Lieutenant's cat (Wee Thomas) whose life and death is more important than those of people.

In *The McGowan Trilogy* I am trying to elicit the inherent visceral response in the audience to real violence. My aim is to show how bad violence is without it being cloaked within McDonagh's absurdist approach.

Many of the plays of Sarah Kane went where McDonagh didn't. She overturned the accepted protocols of depicting violence in a muted way e.g. off stage. This is the orthodoxy I had to confront as well.

I met resistance on many fronts! The stabbing was dropped in all productions. The blood from assaults and gunshot wounds were mixed although *The Cell* came the closest to what I wanted.

Resistance to explicit violence was and is the norm. Protecting the audience from an assault on the senses is a motivating factor as well as it being the perceived wisdom within the art form. Plus it is technically a bit more elaborate and expensive.

Violence on screen is filtered and more acceptable because there are barriers – a screen, it is not live, it is (primarily) entertainment.

Although less is more, for me less is less. I will try to achieve realistic on stage violence in future productions. I believe the futility of violence can only be shown by on stage violence as realistically as possible. The audience has to be bothered or what is the point?

### **Personal Background**

The first play I ever saw was *Hatchet* by Heno Magee. I was sitting in the front row of the Jesuit Hall in Sea Road in Galway an hour before it started in case it was sell out. It wasn't. My primary motivation for attending was my interest in the portrayal of violence. I only had a vague idea what theater involved but I knew it was live. A 'live' hatchet attack was hard for me to resist. It was what I expected and hoped for. Although *Hatchet* did not deliver a hatchet attack in actuality as I had expected (and yearned for) the play was so powerful that it did have a great impact on me.



Photo Seamus Scanlon

There may also have been an unconscious artistic reason for attending which I did not know about until recently. My father had been part of *An Realt* in Galway in the 1950s where he acted in amateur drama. I only learned this from Sean Stafford, who attended *The McGowan Trilogy* production in Galway's Town Hall Theatre.

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Sean was a noted director of Ireland's Irish language theater, *An Taibhdherac* for decades and father of Maeliosa Stafford an early cast member of *Druid Theatre* and a member of UCG's DramaSoc along with Garry Hynes, Mick Lally, Sean McGinley and Marie Mullen.

By coincidence it was a connection involving Maeliosa that killed off any acting ambitions that I had or at least that my mother had for me. After I escaped my first Irish dancing lesson (*Flatley it's all yours!*) by jumping out of a window and running home my mother sent me the following week for acting lessons to a semi-derelict building in Quay Street where Traolach O hAonghusa, a noted Abbey actor in the 1950s and 1960s and the recently retired director of *An Taibhdhearac* held acting workshops through Irish.

I remember one of the ad hoc plays I came up with was a boxing match with seconds etc. so the violence theme was there at an early stage. For the last class we staged a play in the parochial school beside the Town Hall in Galway. I was carrying a shotgun (heavy) and pointing it at someone. Maeliosa was the commanding officer. He delivered his lines flawlessly. Even then he was star quality. I missed my cue because I got distracted. I missed my chance to be a menacing IRA operative. Someone prompted me but it was too late. Now I have a second chance although as a writer not an actor. So far it has gone well. I hope it will go even better.

## APPENDIX A

The McGowan Trilogy. Cast and Crew.

The Cell Theatre, New York, Sep 11 - Oct 5, 2014

### ARTISTIC AND DESIGN

Founding Artistic Director - Nancy Manocherian

Director - Kira Simring

Playwright - Seamus Scanlon

Assistant Director - Brian Reager

Costume Designer - Siena Zoe Allen

Sound Designer - Dylan Fusillo

Scenic/Lighting Designer - Gertjan Houben

Dramaturgy/Prop Designer - Samantha Keogh

Fight Choreographer - Jed Peterson

### STAGE MANAGEMENT

Production Manager - Mackenzie Meeks

Stage Manager - Rachel Kitto

Assistant Stage Manager - Anne Ciarlone

### CAST

Paul Nugent \*- Victor McGowan

Cindy Boyle \*- May McGowan

Philip Callen \*- Pender

Matt Golden \*- Ahern

Conor McIntyre - Barman

Anna Nugent \*- Woman

\* These actors appeared courtesy of Actor's Equity Association. An Equity Approved Showcase.

Kino-Teatr, St. Leonards on Sea (UK) July 9-12, 2015  
Producers The Cell Theater and The Kino-Teatr (Olga Manonova)

### ARTISTIC AND DESIGN

As above except

Fight Choreographer - Jamie Bannerman

Scenic - Russell Baker

Lighting Designer - Kira Simring/Russell Baker/Gary Richmond

### STAGE MANAGEMENT

Production Manager - Mackenzie Meeks

Stage Manager - Mackenzie Meeks

Sound Engineer - Gary Richmond

### CAST

Paul Nugent - Victor McGowan

Ciarán Flynn - Barman

Lisa Harmer-Pope - May McGowan

Patrick Knowles - Pender

Brendan O'Rourke - Ahern

Anna Nugent - Woman

IRELAND- Town Hall Galway, August 28, 2015  
Producers Shakeela Singh and Victor Productions

Stage Manager - Jane Talbot

Lighting - Paul Dunning

Set Design - Paul Dunning and Jane Talbot

Sound - Jake Morgan

Graphic Design - Luke Morgan

Fight Coordinator - Rod Goodall

Weapons - John O'Connor

Hair and make-up - Shakeela Singh

Videographer - Fintan Geraghty

### CAST

Luke Morgan - Victor McGowan

Paul Dunning - Barman

Paul O'Brien - Pender

Aoife Martyn- Woman

Eric Martyn - Ahern

Jackie Roantree - May McGowan

## APPENDIX B

### Production History

(2016) The Long Wet Grass, Human Rights Forum, CWE, New York (Mar 2)

(2016) The Long Wet Grass, The City and the Arts, Lehman College, New York (Feb 25)

(2015) The McGowan Trilogy, The Town Hall Theatre, Galway (Aug 28)

(2015) The McGowan Trilogy, The Town Hall Theatre, Westport (Aug 8)

(2015) The McGowan Trilogy, Kino-Teatr, Hastings, UK (Jul 9-12)

(2015) The McGowan Trilogy, An Taibhdhearc, Galway (Jun 5-6)

(2014) The McGowan Trilogy, The Cell Theatre, NYC (Sep 11-Oct 5)

(2013) Boys Swam Before Me, An Beal Bocht, NYC (Mar 23-24)

(2013) Boys Swam Before Me, Lehman College, NYC (April 25)

(2012) Dancing At Lunacy, the Cell Theatre, NYC (Mar 1-30)

### Staged Readings

Scanlon, S. (2013) The Long Wet Grass, NEWvember New Play Festival, Tivoli NY, Nov 7-10

Scanlon, S. (2013) The Long Wet Grass, The Cell Theatre, May 21

Scanlon, S. (2011) Dancing At Lunacy, The Cell Theatre, May 22

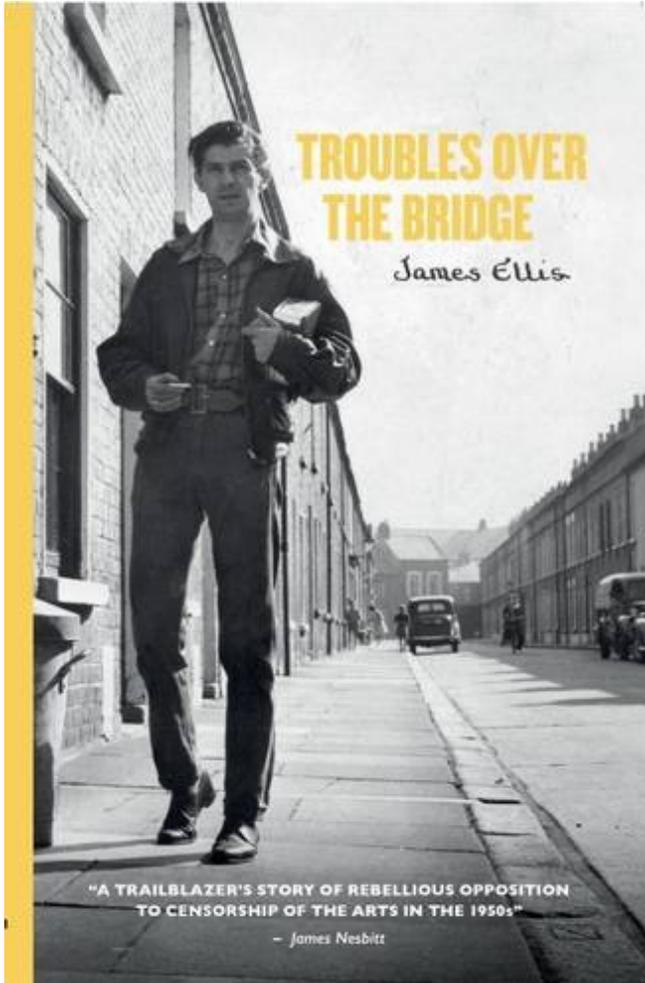
### Publications

Scanlon, S. (2015) The Long Wet Grass (extract) Promethean, Spring 2015, 26-28

Scanlon, S. (2014) The McGowan Trilogy (Arlen House, 2014)

## *Troubles Over The Bridge: Jimmy Ellis and His Fight Against Censorship of the Arts*

by James Ellis



**Belfast, 1959: the young Group Theatre director James Ellis is approached by local playwright Sam Thompson, who announces “I have a play you wouldn’t touch with a bargepole!”**

Nearly 60 years on, the late James Ellis, known to all as Jimmy, presents an account of the strong and well-orchestrated attempts to censor Belfast playwright Sam Thompson in his recently launched book *Troubles Over The Bridge*. Strewn with Ellis’s recognisable and evocative language, the story will no doubt still raise heckles among many, not only in the arts community but also among the younger generation who have little experience of such overt censorship. Ellis’ memoir is a captivating tale of angry young men, of trailblazing Northern Ireland theatre, and of unwavering values based on strong ethics and a belief in telling the real story. For many, it may seem like a bygone era of artistic suppression. Others will argue that it still happens, albeit in a more subtle way and for different reasons.

Belfast-born actor Jimmy Ellis starred in much-loved productions such as the long-running BBC TV detective series *Z Cars*, and alongside a young Kenneth Branagh in BBC Northern Ireland’s series of “Billy” plays. Less may be known about his early days as a theatre director. Sadly, Ellis passed away in March 2014, but alongside the legacy of his 60-year career in TV and theatre, he had penned *Troubles Over The Bridge*. The book tells the story of how the Group Theatre effectively banned the production of *Over The Bridge*, Thompson’s powerful portrayal of a sectarian dispute in Belfast’s shipyard.

James Ellis was born into a shipyard family during the Great Depression and was immersed in the culture of the area from his early years. His father was a sheet-metal worker in Harland and Wolff who worked on the Titanic. At that time, the Belfast shipyards were the most famous in the world. Having left Northern Ireland with his family to follow the work when times were hard, Ellis came back when the shipbuilding industry rejuvenated but found himself following his passion into performing arts and directing. All those years later, it was poignant that he reconnected with the city and its primary, sweat-inducing industry through the most unexpected setting of a play in the shipyards. In *Troubles Over The Bridge*, Ellis tells how the Group Theatre’s Board of Directors shied away from producing what they deemed was too controversial a play. Ellis felt he

had no choice but to resign his position as Theatre Director in order to direct the production he knew had to be seen. Together with Thompson, they went on to stage the play in Belfast's Empire Theatre where it played to a welcoming audience of 42,000 people over seven weeks, with little of the anticipated resistance. 2015 marks 55 years since that first performance of *Over The Bridge*.

Since then, the play has since been staged in Dublin, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Brighton and the London West End, all following a trail blazed by Ellis.

Ellis' son, Toto, himself a writer and producer, said: "Whilst my father was rightly proud of his acting career, it was in fact his early days as a Director of which he was most proud. Specifically, his battle with Sam Thompson to stage "Over the Bridge" in the face of censorship. To have become Artistic Director of the Group Theatre, as the son of a sheetmetal worker in 1950s Belfast, whilst still in his twenties, was a pretty remarkable achievement.

So he certainly didn't take it lightly when he resigned that post on a point of principle to stage the play Thompson had written. He risked everything at this point to try and stage "Over the Bridge", with absolutely no guarantee that they would be able to put it on, or even ever be able to find work in the theatre in Belfast again.

Dad died without knowing his book would ever be published. So this is a pretty special moment for us to be able to tell his story to the world. It's a fascinating read and it documents an incredibly important moment in Northern Ireland's history."

The pages of *Troubles Over The Bridge* are filled with amusing anecdotes and encounters with legends such as Orson Welles, all underpinned by the passionate story of how Ellis had the courage of his convictions and championed anti-sectarianism in the middle of the challenging post-war era.

Robina Ellis, Jimmy's wife of almost 40 years, Robina, said: "The 1950s was possibly the most significant decade of the second half of the 20th century for drama on stage and film. At a rebellious time when America and England in particular were breaking boundaries with kitchen sink dramas and angry young men, the likes of John Osborne and Arthur Miller were to the forefront. Here in Northern

Ireland, Jimmy was on a mission, also trailblazing, on behalf of Sam Thompson's controversial play. The publication of his book, *Troubles Over The Bridge*, is the most important public tribute and lasting memorial to Jimmy from me and our son, Toto.

*Troubles over the Bridge* was funded through subscription, a fitting tribute to the high regard in which Ellis was held, with individuals financially sponsoring the publication of the book. All subscribers are mentioned warmly and include well-known names as former BBC Controller and Head of UTV Robin Walsh and Brian Garrett, Sam Thompson's literary executor over many years.

Longtime friend, actor Adrian Dunbar has referred to how the story has passed into folklore among actors in Northern Ireland, telling of how it set up a template for actors to use the theatre as a platform to explore difficult political questions. Adrian will also be playing Sam Thompson in a forthcoming production of a film about the book, being produced by Toto Ellis.

James Kerr from publisher Lagan Press said: "We are delighted to play our part in telling this enthralling story. This was a tale that needed to be told given its critical significance to the cultural and creative development of Northern Ireland.

Lagan Press over the last 20 years or more has published some of the finest writers, poets and playwrights from the North, inspiring voices that make us look again at the world around us. The achievement of this book is to reconfirm the ever present, unflinching commitment by artists in Northern Ireland to telling the story of this place without compromise or apology. This book is a glorious testimony to the resilience, perseverance and dedication of Jimmy Ellis a man who lived, breathed and personified the cultural personality, the creative DNA of Northern Ireland. Lagan Press is honoured to publish this work."

Published by Lagan Press, the book is available through Lagan Press at [www.laganpress.co](http://www.laganpress.co) and retailers including Easons and Waterstones as well as via Amazon.

# Druid announces details of exciting 2016 programme



Following their recent national and international success with DruidShakespeare (nominated in 10 categories in the forthcoming Irish Times Irish Theatre Awards), the multi Tony Award-winning company revealed an impressive slate of work, cementing their place as Ireland's premier independent touring theatre company at home and on the world stage:

- A unique presentation of *Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett's modern classic, from the hugely talented Druid Ensemble
- An exciting world premiere of *Helen and I* by talented young Tuam playwright Meadhbh McHugh
- A new production of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, Druid's multi award winning play
- The continuation of successful artist development initiatives Druid Debuts and FUEL: Emerging Artists Residency 2016

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'In 2016 Druid achieves its ambitions of producing four productions in one year and touring them all over Ireland, and coast to coast across the US.' said Artistic Director, Garry Hynes. 'We are working with national and international producers including MCD in Ireland, and David Eden Productions and Center Theatre Group in the US. The company will produce classic and new work including *The*

*Beauty Queen of Leenane* with Marie Mullen, which will embark on a 6-month tour, and *Helen and I*, a new play by Tuam writer Meadhbh McHugh, directed by Annabelle Comyn. We will continue our development of new, local talent with FUEL and Druid Debuts and throughout the year we will engage with *Waking the Feminists* to see how we, as a company, can begin to address gender inequality in theatre. A major step in our 2016 programme will be a very special production of *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, which was initiated by members of the Druid Ensemble. This shared ownership of the artistic programme marks a new and very welcome departure for the company.'

## **Big Maggie**

Druid's production of John B. Keane's *Big Maggie*, directed by Garry Hynes, sees the return of Aisling O'Sullivan in the lead role, Keith Duffy reprising his role as lusty commercial traveller Teddy Heelin, John Olohan as Byrne and Joan Sheehy as Old Woman. The production also

features top Irish talent Clare Barrett, Karen McCartney, Charlotte McCurry, Emmet Byrne, Muiris Crowley, Clare Monnelly and Frank O'Sullivan.

The Gaiety has announced that the run will be extended by popular demand until 12th March and tickets are on sale now here <http://www.ticketmaster.ie/Big-Maggie-tickets/artist/1598308>

### **Waiting for Godot**

Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett will be performed by members of the Druid Ensemble - Marty Rea, Aaron Monaghan, Garrett Lombard and Rory Nolan. This iconic play will be presented in the intimate surroundings of the Mick Lally Theatre on Druid Lane. Tony award winner Garry Hynes will direct the production, working with the same dynamic creative team that designed DruidShakespeare.

### **Helen and I**

As part of the company's ongoing commitment to new writing talent, Druid will present the work of Tuam playwright Meadhbh McHugh. *Helen and I* will receive its world premiere in August in Druid's home at the Mick Lally Theatre, Galway. The production was previously read as part of Druid Debuts and will be directed by Anabelle Comyn.

*Helen & I* tells the story of two sisters who return home to look after their dying father. In the hothouse conditions of a summer's weekend, the future emerges from hard-won and hard-fought rearrangements of the past.

### **The Beauty Queen of Leenane**

Druid officially opened the Town Hall Theatre in 1996 with the premiere of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* by Martin McDonagh. In September, to mark the 20th anniversary of its opening, Druid will return with a new production of the award winning play. Garry Hynes will once again direct this dark comedy and Marie Mullen will this time play the role of manipulative ageing mother Mag, having originally played the part of daughter Maureen in 1996.

Touring is central to Druid and *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* will be the company's flagship touring production for this coming winter and spring 2017. After its Galway run, the production will play across Ireland and embark upon a coast-to-coast tour of the US.

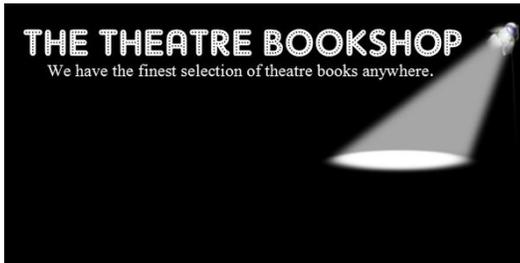
Druid received four Tony Awards for the original production in 1998, including Best Direction of a Play (Hynes), Best Leading Actress, Best Featured Actress (Mullen) and Best Featured Actor.

### **Druid Debuts and FUEL**

Druid's commitment to artist development continues with cornerstone initiatives Druid Debuts, staged readings of new work, in July, and year three of FUEL: Emerging Artist Residency in the autumn. Druid is delighted to announce a five-year funding partnership with St. Anthony's & Claddagh Credit Union, Galway, to support artists through FUEL.

Full details of all Druid 2016 productions will be announced in the coming months.

Druid would like to acknowledge the continuing support of the Arts Council, Culture Ireland, NUIG and St. Anthony's & Claddagh Credit Union.



## The Theatre Bookshop

[thetheatrebookshop.com](http://thetheatrebookshop.com)

While many bookshop websites are great if you know the particular book you require, they often fail when you are looking for something relating to a particular subject or category. The Theatre Bookshop is a new website launching in January 2016 specializing in theatre and related books specifically designed to make it easier to browse categories to find the right book for you. To save you scrolling through pages and pages of titles thrown up by vague search results, we have used our extensive experience and knowledge of theatre to categorize tens of thousands of theatre titles – with more added every day. To browse, simply click on your category of interest and follow the selections in the sub-categories provided.

For example - looking for a comprehensive list of books on Shakespearean acting but unsure what keywords to put into the search? Or you can't remember the title of David Mamet's books on acting and don't want to spend time scrolling through all his play scripts or books relating to his plays? Simply click on the Acting category, followed by the Acting Techniques and Training subcategory, find the relevant page and browse, knowing that you are only looking at relevant titles. In the same manner you can browse titles specific to areas of interest as diverse as Clowns and Clowning, Stage Combat, Stage Management and Production, Directing Theory and Techniques, Writing for Screen, Performance Studies etc. etc. But if you are simply looking for a title you know, our search facility will bring you directly to the book, if we have the title listed.

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As we are based in Ireland we specialise in books related to Irish Theatre and have a comprehensive listing of all new books available by and about Irish playwrights as well as books on Irish Theatre History and Criticism. For now, the books listed are those available to us in Ireland and the UK so many titles listed will not be readily available in the US. Over time we will also be in a position to list and supply US published titles.

Each section also has a separate list of new and forthcoming titles to make it easier to keep track of new titles in your areas of interest and to pre-order books as soon as they are announced. And, because there are real people behind the site who are passionate about theatre and theatre books, if you still can't find what you are looking for, just e-mail us directly and we will endeavour to find it for you.

We also operate a Loyalty Scheme to reward customers for all their purchases on the site. Every time you make a purchase you are awarded 4 points for every dollar, euro or pound you spend. When you reach 100 points this equates to \$1 / €1 or £1 which you can redeem at the checkout. Points can be accumulated to use at any time.

The various categories will be developed over time as well a whole range of new services that will be of interest to everyone interested in theatre and theatre-related activities from the professional practitioner to the amateur actor and from the theatre academic to the casually interested.

Check out the site now and if you like what you see remember to tell your friends and colleagues who might also be interested. Why not register with us we will keep you informed as we develop our related services. You can also follow us on Facebook and Twitter. Happy Browsing!

### **About Us**

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# Lady Augusta Gregory's plays and translations in Samhain 1901-1908.

by Adrienne Leavy

## Introduction: The Irish Literary Revival

This essay examines the legacy of the playwright Lady Augusta Gregory, who as Christopher Murray has argued “is entitled to be assessed as a writer on her own merits.” Gregory is recognized as one of the key individuals in the Irish literary Revival, a movement that took place against the background of a larger groundswell of cultural revival involving the Irish language, traditional folklore and native Gaelic games. Several important organizations, all committed in various ways to the project of Irish autonomy and self-reliance, emerged from this period, including the Gaelic League (Conradh Na Gaeilge), the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), and the Irish Literary Theatre. Broadly speaking, the term “literary revival” refers to the period in Irish history from the late 1880s to the 1920s when writers (primarily those of Anglo-Irish descent) turned to the ancient Irish past and to Celtic mythology and folklore for inspiration in their efforts to carve out a uniquely Irish aesthetic identity that was separate and distinct from Britain. As Emer Nolan has pointed out, this was the time period when “Irish literature abruptly ceased to be a self-consciously colonial branch of English literature.”



Gregory is perhaps best known for her long-time association with the poet William Butler Yeats. She was his patron, collaborator and colleague, and together with Edward Martyn they established the Irish Literary Theatre in 1897. Two years later, in 1899, the ILT's first productions, Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen* and Martyn's *The Heather Field*, were staged at the Antient Concert Rooms in Dublin.<sup>1</sup> Along with the playwright John Millington Synge, she and Yeats were the controlling directors of the Abbey Theatre, a position she held until her death in 1932. For many years Gregory managed the day to day operations of the Abbey. During her tenure she was involved in defending the artistic freedom of both Synge and Sean O'Casey when audiences rioted over Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* and O'Casey's *The*

*Plough and the Stars*. She also directed the first production of George Bernard Shaw's *The Shewing up of Blanco Posnet* (1909), in defiance of the authorities in Dublin Castle, and was instrumental in ensuring that *The Playboy* was on the bill of the Abbey Players first tour of America in 1911-1912 despite vigorous protests from Irish-Americans groups.

The cultural nationalism that Gregory embraced as an adult took root with her immersion in the Irish language and her archival work in collecting the stories of country people in her home county of Galway. Prior to her involvement with the dramatic movement Gregory was

a noted folklorist and translator, publishing two influential collections of Irish mythological tales, *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902), a retelling of the Ulster cycle of Irish sagas, and *Gods and Fighting Men* (1904), a translation of the legends of Finn MacCumhaill, the Tualha De Danaan and the Fianna.<sup>ii</sup> Other books include her collections *Poets and Dreamers* (1903) and *A Book of Saints and Wonders* (1906). With the establishment of the ILT her interest in cultural nationalism found a new creative outlet, as the mission of the new theatrical company was to create and stage Irish plays instead of relying on imported English drama performed by English touring companies.

Critical attention has typically focused on Gregory's work with Yeats, her astute management of the Abbey Theatre and her folklore publications. However, just as important to any assessment of her place in the literary revival is a consideration of Gregory as playwright. In fact, she enjoyed a prolific career as a dramatist, writing a total of forty-two plays, thirty-six of which were performed over the period 1903-1927. In addition to her own work she translated plays written in Irish into English, most notably her translations of the plays of Douglas Hyde, whom she met through her early involvement with the Gaelic League. She also translated several comedies by Moliere, which were staged by the Abbey between 1906 and 1926.

In her biography of Gregory Judith Hill argues that "Lady Gregory was neither a stylistic innovator nor a writer who aimed primarily to expose the human condition." Instead, writes Hill, "her subject was society, and most particularly, the social and cultural values of her Galway neighbors as she understood them through her empathetic folklore." The early plays published in *Samhain* substantiate Hill's assessment of Gregory's work and reveal a skilled writer of comedies, whose deft portrayal of Irish country life established an audience for the new dramatic movement.

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### **Development of the Kiltartain Dialect**

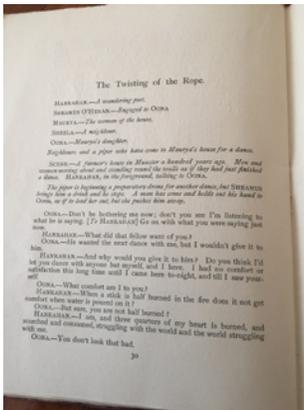
One of the most distinctive characteristics of Gregory's plays is the dialect she developed while engaged in translating Irish folklore and the mythological stories of Cuchulain and the Fenian. Gregory drew on the speech patterns of people living in the West of Ireland, where Gaelic and a form of English influenced by Gaelic syntax were spoken. Named after a town near her home, the Kiltartain dialect was a mixture of local Galway dialect and Irish language syntax. As P. J. Mathews describes it, "the most distinguishing feature of this dialect was the degree to which it was nuanced by idiomatic translations from Irish which did not conform to the grammatical and syntactical rules of standard English." For example, often the subject and the verb are placed at the end of the sentence or clause. Furthermore, the use of the reflexive pronoun is a stylistic characteristic found in many of her plays. Throughout her work, especially the comedies, Gregory artfully employs this dialect to showcase the simple speech of Irish country characters for dramatic effect. Moreover, her skill with dialogue is evident in her collaborations with Yeats on several of his plays, including *The Pot of Broth*, *The King's Threshold*, *On Baile's Strand*, and *The Unicorn from the Stars*. Indeed Yeats acknowledged that he needed the assistance of Gregory to shape the dialogue in these early ILT plays so it could pass for authentic speech on stage.

## *Samhain*

The intentions of the fledging Irish Literary Theatre were promoted through the pages of a series of three modernist “little magazines” which Yeats founded and edited: *Beltaine* (1899-1900), *Samhain* (1901-1908) and *The Arrow* (1906-1909). The most substantial of these periodicals was *Samhain*, which Yeats described as being named after “the old name for the beginning of winter . . . because our plays this year are in October.” In a series of essays Yeats articulated his vision of cultural nationalism and drew a line between art and political propaganda, insisting on the primacy of the artist’s personal vision and the necessity for artistic freedom in the theatre. He also stressed the importance of publishing the plays staged at the theatre, writing in the second issue of *Samhain*, “As we do not think a play can be worth acting, and not worth reading, all our plays will be published in time.” This publication also carried some of Yeats’s most important dramaturgical essays on his vision for a national theatre.<sup>iii</sup> Described as “an occasional review,” *Samhain* comprised of seven annual issues, published in Dublin (first by Sealy Byres & Walker and later by Maunsel & Company) over a span of eight years, from 1901 to 1908, with a gap in publication in 1907.

## Lady Gregory’s plays in *Samhain*

Gregory began writing her own plays in 1902, after first trying her hand at the dramatic form with her English translations of Hyde’s Irish language plays. A poet and a scholar who later became the first President of Ireland, Hyde founded the Gaelic League in 1893 with the goal of “de-Anglicizing” Ireland through preserving and reviving the Irish language as a living vernacular.<sup>iv</sup> He and Gregory had worked closely together in their collecting and recording of Irish folklore, and one of the early branches of the Gaelic League was established in Gregory’s home borough of Kiltartain. Bernard McKenna argues that in *Samhain* Yeats “gives the work of the language movement and the Gaelic League a place of respect and prominence,” and this contention is borne out by the fact that he included one of Hyde’s plays with Gregory’s translation in the first issue. The early synergy between the ILT and the Gaelic League is evident from Yeats’s announcement in the first issue that any profits from the sale of this issue would go to the Gaelic League. As the aim of the new theatrical movement was to cultivate new Irish drama in English, it is important not to read too much into this initial alignment. The goal of the theatrical movement was to be as inclusive as possible and incorporate various ideological perspectives; however, as the theatre flourished, the ultimate arbiter for Yeats when it came to staging new Irish plays was an aesthetic, rather than an ideological or nationalistic standard.



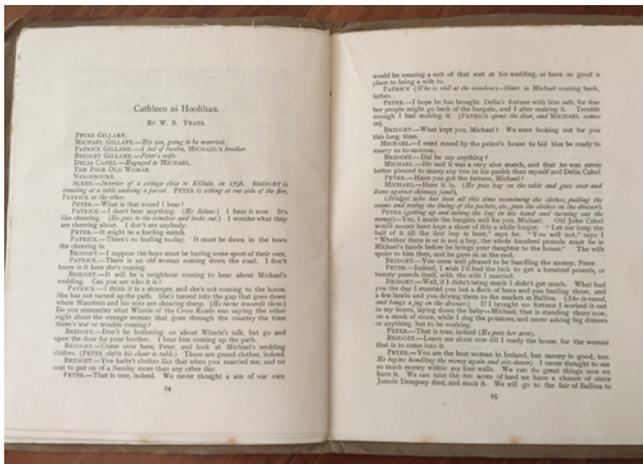
In the first issue of *Samhain* (1901), only one play was published, Hyde’s *Casadh an tSúgáin*, with Lady Gregory’s Hiberno-English translation, *The Twisting of the Rope*, directly afterward. The play tells the story of Hanrahan, a wandering poet who bewitches a young woman away from her fiancée during a dance party in a country cottage. The neighbors are afraid to confront Hanrahan and eject him from the dance, for fear he will put a curse on them as “he has a curse that would split the trees and that would burst the stones.” One of the women devises a plan to trick Hanrahan into making a hay rope to pull an overturned coach, where-in in the process of making the hay rope he will end up outside the house and they can then bar the door shut. Hanrahan cannot curse them if he voluntarily leaves the house, which he unwittingly does while twisting the hay into a rope. First produced by the Irish Literary Theatre on October 21st 1901 and featuring Hyde and members of the Gaelic League, the play was a huge success. Yeats was quick to appreciate the cultural and political significance

of the event, writing in the second issue of *Samhain* that “it was the first play, in Irish, played in a Theatre, and did much towards making plays a necessary part in Irish propoganda.” It was important to Hyde that the play be widely seen in its original form, and in an effort to cultivate as broad an audience as possible, Yeats included the following statement in *Samhain*: “As Dr. Douglas Hyde does not reserve the Irish acting right of his play, any friends of the language who like may play it after October 26th.”

In the second issue of *Samhain* (1902), Yeats declared “our movement is a return to the people,” and the first of two plays published, the nationalist drama *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, reflects the movement’s desire to aesthetically dramatize Irish history and legend. Set in the revolutionary year of 1798, the play tells of a Poor Old Woman (the feminized figure of Ireland) who mysteriously appears in a cottage in the West of Ireland. The Old Woman exhorts the young men of the village to die a martyr’s death for Ireland. Responding the Old Woman’s appeal, Michael, the eldest son of the house rushes out after the Old Woman, leaving his family and the girl he was to marry the following day. When the younger son

enters the house, his father asks him, “Did you see an old woman going down the path?” and he replies, “I did not, but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen.” With Maud Gonne in the title role, the story resonated with audiences and provided the company with another popular success. In the published text, the play, which was spelt “*Cathleen ni Hoolihan*,” is credited to “W.B.Yeats” alone; however Gregory’s authorship of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was long suspected by critics. Although she never spoke publicly of the authorship of the play, it is now uniformly recognized that she was the author who wrote most, if not all of the play. Yeats did acknowledge her input in his dedication of volume one and two of *Plays for an Irish Theatre*; however, he compounded the initial impression that he was the sole author of the play in the opening essay of the magazine

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where he refers to the play as “my *Cathleen ni Hoolihan*.” This claim was renewed in the 1904 issue of *Samhain* wherein Yeats listed both the new plays produced and the productions that were revived by the National Theatre society in 1093, and after listing “*Twenty Five, by Lady Gregory*,” he continues with “*Cathleen ni Houlihan, The Pot of Broth, and The Hour Glass, by myself*.”

The second play in this issue was another one-act written by Hyde, *An Naom Ar Iarraid*, with Gregory’s English translation, *The Lost Saint*, appearing directly after the Gaelic version. The setting for the play is “a large room as it was in the old time.” Gregory weaves Irish words such as “amadán” meaning “fool,” into her English dialogue, in the same manner as the word would have been incorporated into the speech of the local people on her estate at Coole Park.

By 1902, Gregory and Yeats had merged the ILT with Frank and W.G. Fay’s Irish National Dramatic Company, and together these companies became the Irish National Theatre Society in 1903. One of the benefits of merging with the Fay brothers was that they employed Irish actors, so Yeats and Gregory no longer had to rely on imported English actors for their plays.

In the 1903 issue, Hyde's peasant comedy, *Teóc na m-boct* was published, accompanied by Lady Gregory's translation, *The Poorhouse*. Yeats gives prominence to Irish-language drama at the beginning of this issue by discussing at length a number of Gaelic League performances that took place throughout the year, but he is also careful to add that "Though one welcomes every kind of vigorous life, I am, myself, most interested in 'The Irish National Theatre Society,' which has no propaganda but that of good art." The other play published in this issue is Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. It was during this year that Gregory's first play *Twenty-Five*, a one-act comedy, was produced by the National Theatre Society,<sup>vi</sup> and for the remaining run of *Samhain* at least one of her plays would be featured.

The most substantial issue of the magazine was published in 1904 to coincide with the opening of the new Abbey Theatre venue which was subsidized by the financial backing of the English woman Annie Horniman. In fact, the magazine published Horniman's letter offering free use of the Abbey Theatre to the INTC along with the company's signed acceptance of her offer. Additional contents included "First Principles," one of the key essays by Yeats on dramatic theory, along with Synge's *In the Shadow of the Glen* and a line drawing of Frank Fay in the role of Cuchulain and a portrait of Synge. By this time, Yeats's support of the drama supplied by the Gaelic League was waning, and he expressed disappointment at the quality of the Gaelic plays that were acted and published during the year, which he considered inferior to the work of Hyde.

Also included is Gregory's romantic nationalist drama, *The Rising of the Moon*. One of the theatres's most frequently performed works, *The Rising of the Moon* was first produced by the INTS in Molesworth Street in the winter of 1903. The one act plot focuses on a Fenian escapee who is protected from capture by a police sergeant. When stopped by Policeman Z the escaped convict pretends to be "one Jimmy Walsh, a ballad singer." The man gains the sympathy of the office through singing the old Fenian seditious songs, "Granuaile" and "The Rising of the Moon," which the officer knew in his youth. He persuades the sergeant to let him escape by convincing him of his own nationalist leanings, for as he tells the officer, "Maybe, sergeant, it comes into your head sometimes, in spite of your belt and tunic, that it might have been as well for you to have followed Granuaile."

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In the 1905 issue, Yeats argued against a simplistic aesthetic version of Irish identity, cautioning his readers that "a nation is injured by the picking out of a single type and setting that into print or upon the stage as a type of the whole nation."<sup>vii</sup> Two of Gregory's plays were published, the first being the comedy *Spreading the News*, which was produced by the INTS at the Abbey on December 27, 1904. As Murray succinctly describes the plot, a false report of murder and adultery "grows from the simplest of misinterpretation until a whole community is involved in seemingly inextricable misunderstanding." The cause of all this chaos is Mrs. Tarpey, the partially deaf village gossip, who hears only fragments of conversation, thereby spreading news based on misinformation. Her second play, *An Fear Siubáil*, which the credits list as being "put into Irish by 'Tórna.'" Tórna was the pen-name for Tadhg Ó Donnchadha, a writer, poet and translator who was Professor of Irish at University College Cork, and a prominent member of both the Gaelic League and the GAA. It is significant that, despite the reservations expressed by Yeats one year earlier about the direction of Gaelic League drama, both he and Lady Gregory choose to include an Irish translation of her work

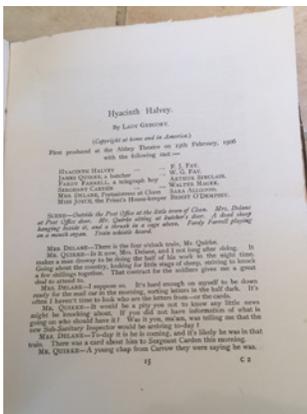
by a noted Gaelic scholar rather than one of her other plays that were produced in 1905 such as *Kincora* or *The White Cockade*, thereby continuing their support of Irish language based drama.

Another of Gregory's comedies, *Hyacinth Halvey*, appeared in the 1906 issue of *Samhain*. First produced at the Abbey on February 19, 1906, the play starred both Fay brothers as Hyacinth Halvey and James Quirke respectively, and Sara Allgood in the role of Mrs. Delane. The scene was set as being "outside the Post Office at the little town of Cloon." Gregory's skill with dialect, full of vigorous archaisms and poetic energy, is evident in many witty exchanges between the characters such as the one between Mrs. Delane, the postmistress, and Fardy, the telegraph boy. Commenting on the good character of the new Sub-Sanitary Inspector, Hyacinth Halvey, Mrs. Delane, doubts that Fardy will ever acquire a similar character, to which Fardy retorts: "If I had the like of that of a character it is not here carrying messages I would be. It's in Noonan's Hotel I would be driving cars." Halvey comes to the town with wildly exaggerated testimonials: "He possess the fire of the Gael, the strength of the Norman, the vigour of the Dane, the solidity of the Saxon." The more Halvey tries to debunk his alleged good character, the more he confirms it in the eyes of the townspeople.

Although there was no issue of *Samhain* published in 1907, Gregory enjoyed a prolific year as a writer, with a number of her plays being produced at the Abbey, including *The Jackdaw* (February 23), *The Rising of the Moon* (March 9), *The Poorhouse* (April 3, credited in the final issue of *Samhain* to "Douglas Hyde and Lady Augusta Gregory"), *Dervorgilla* (October 31), and *The Unicorn and the Stars* (November 21, credited to "W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory").

The final issue of *Samhain* (1908) included *Dervorgilla*, which Adrian Frazier considers "one of Lady Gregory's best plays." An historical tragedy in one act, the play tells the story of Dervorgilla, daughter of the King of Meath, who was once the Queen of Breffny. In Irish mythology she is often blamed for bringing English rule to Ireland. Dervorgilla abandons her husband, O' Rourke, the King of Breffny, and flees with her lover, Diarmuid Mc Murrough, the King of Leinster, in the year 1152. As the prologue to the play explains, "O' Rourke and his friends invaded Leinster in revenge, and in the wars which followed, Diarmuid, driven from Ireland, appealed for help to Henry II of England, and was given an army under Strongbow, to whom Diarmuid promised Leinster as a reward."

The play is set in 1193, and Dervorgilla is now an old woman who has retired in disguise to Mellifont Abbey, near Drogheda. An old servant Flann and his wife Mona, who know their mistress's secret identity, loyally tell her that it was "the quarrelling of the provinces with one another" that brought the English in, but Dervorgilla rejects their comfort and asserts, "I brought them in for good or evil by my own sin." A visiting song maker unwittingly sings of her past, and when he leaves Dervorgilla instructs her servant to follow him and prevent his singing his song to the English. Flann is killed by the soldiers while trying to persuade the traveler to leave the area. In her grief, his widow reveals the Queen's true identity. As soon as she is unmasked her status in the community disappears, and one by one the young people who courted her favor abandon her. Here, Gregory's concern is with paying for the sins of one's past, which Dervorgilla ultimately has to confront.



### Conclusion

In all, there were nine dramatic texts of Gregory's published over the course of *Sambain's* run: three translations of Hyde's Gaelic language plays, the unaccredited *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, and five more original one-act plays. Her writing career extended well beyond the print run of *Sambain*, for as Morash points out, Gregory "wrote more for the theatre than any other dramatist of the period, having thirty-one opening nights (including collaborations and translations) at the Abbey between 1904 and 1921."

In Murray's estimation, one of the reasons Gregory's plays have fallen out of favor is because her language is considered quaint and old-fashioned. While this may be true from the perspective of a contemporary audience, her work should be judged from the vantage point of the time in which it was written. Through her work with Irish indigenous dialects, Gregory, along with Synge and Yeats, created a separate theatrical tradition in Ireland. And, like Synge and Yeats, Gregory's achievement was her ability to give voice to the emerging Irish nation on the metropolitan stage. Jason Willwerscheid draws attention to the fact that "throughout her plays, an atmosphere of carnival, of wonderment, and of transfiguration colors the scene," and in her comedies Gregory successfully realized the domestic politics of rural Ireland without resorting to didactic nationalist propaganda. Moreover, as Hill has argued, Gregory's plays "are still largely untapped sources of understanding that society."

Whereas Moore and Martyn favored an Ibsenite drama of contemporary realism and Yeats sought to stage visionary and symbolist drama, in the early years of the Abbey, when the theatre was cultivating an audience and building a legacy, what Nicholas Grene terms the "distinctive mode of home-grown peasant drama" of Synge and Gregory held sway. Gregory's folk comedies and farces, filled with the living speech of the West of Ireland communities, were an important contribution to the success of the theatrical movement's efforts to aesthetically imagine an Irish identity on stage. Gregory commands recognition as a significant revivalist playwright.

**Suggested Reading:**

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i For its second season, the ILT staged George Moore's *The Bending of the Bough*, Martyn's *Meave* and *Alice Milligan's the Last Feast of the Fianna*.

ii Critics have charged that Gregory sanitized certain aspects of the Cuchulain saga in an effort to make the work more palatable to both the Catholic Church and the Victorian sensibilities of certain aspects of her Anglo-Irish audience; however, as P.J. Mathews points out, "*Cuchulain of Muirthemne* endures as an important pioneering attempt to render the Gaelic literary inheritance into Hiberno-English dialect."

iii These essays are "Windlestraws (1901), "Notes" (1902 and 1903), "The Reform of the Theatre" (1903), "First Principles" (1904) and "The Play, the Player and the Scene" (1904), "Literature and the Living Voice" (1906) and "First Principles" (1908).

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iv The clarion call for Hyde's movement was a paper he delivered in 1894 titled "The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland."

v Aside from the scholarly work on this issue, further evidence that Lady Gregory was in fact the sole author of this play can be found in her journals in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library.

vi For an analysis of this play see Jason Willwerscheid's essay listed above.

vii *Sambain* (1905), "Notes and Opinions," p.8.

The Lady Gregory & Yeats Heritage Trail incorporates historical sites between the towns of Gort and Loughrea associated with Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats. These sites include Kilmacduagh, Coole Park, Kiltartan Gregory Museum, Thoor Ballylee, Killinane Graveyard, Roxborough Gates, Woodville Walled Gardens and St. Brendan's Cathedral. [www.ladygregoryyeatsrail.com](http://www.ladygregoryyeatsrail.com)