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## **Dancing on a One-Way Street: Irish Reactions to *Dancing at Lughnasa* in New York**

Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* is an important example of the inter-relationship of American and Irish theatre, particularly since 1990. Its script draws heavily on American culture, bringing us songs by Cole Porter and an approach to the narration of remembered events that is highly reminiscent of the work of Tennessee Williams. And its production was one of the first of many Irish successes on the New York stage from the 1990s onwards, being followed by productions of plays by Martin McDonagh, Conor McPherson and indeed by Brian Friel himself, whose *Faith Healer* was a critical and commercial success on Broadway in 2006.

*Dancing at Lughnasa* premiered on 24 April 1990 at the Abbey Theatre, where it was directed by Patrick Mason. It toured nationally and internationally until 1993, giving rise to a 1998 film starring Meryl Streep. In 1999, the play was revived as part of a "Friel Festival" held to celebrate the author's seventieth birthday, where it was presented as a "vessel of celebratory nostalgia", according to Karen Fricker (1999, 43). This, as Fricker notes, is "deeply ironic": Friel's achievement with *Lughnasa*, and throughout his work, is "to question the instinct for nostalgia, to expose the gap between experience and understanding, words and meaning, what is institutionally categorized as history and what really happened" (43). Throughout its production history in Ireland, audiences seemed unaware of the challenging aspects of Friel's script, instead focusing on the play's sentimental and nostalgic qualities. Rather than reading the play as a critique of Irish society in the early 1990s, audiences were instead encouraged to see its international success – particularly on Broadway – as evidence of Ireland's newfound self-assurance on the global stage. The production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* thus appears to have been received in ways that are not only unsupported by the script, but which also seems to undermine the themes considered by the play. How can play and production give rise to such divergent responses?

To answer this question, I want to suggest in this paper that, as Nicholas Grene argues elsewhere in this publication, different accounts of a play's reception can be constructed retrospectively, perhaps as a result of a misplaced or inappropriate piety towards the past. Just as there is a mythology of sorts about *Faith Healer*, something similar has happened with the original Abbey Theatre production of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, whereby the canonical status of the play within Ireland was earned not

through its reception before Irish audiences, but instead through those audiences' knowledge and appreciation of its success in America. This "mythology" reveals the way in which culture moves from Ireland to the United States and back again, allowing us to deepen our consideration of the performance of Irishness on the international stage.

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The nostalgic attitude to the 1999 Dublin production of *Lughnasa* is relatively easy to account for: the Ireland of 1999 was considerably different to the Ireland of 1990. An explicit example of this can be seen in comparing different audience responses to scenes in the play. For example, at the opening of the second act of *Lughnasa*, in which Maggie and Michael talk together in the Mundys' kitchen. Michael says that he is writing a letter to Santa Claus, to which Maggie replies, "In September? Nothing like getting in before the rush" (Friel 1999a, 68). In the 1990 production, this scene was played for comedic effect, and the audience responded with laughter to the idea of a child thinking of Christmas in early September. In the 1999 revival of the play, this line was again delivered to produce laughter but, on that occasion, none was forthcoming. During the intervening nine years, Christmas had become so commercialized a part of Irish life that the idea of a child thinking of Santa Claus in September was greeted not with amusement but weary recognition<sup>1</sup>.

Ireland in 1990 was of course on the verge of transformation, but the atmosphere that had characterized the 1980s – of economic gloom and political turbulence – remained when *Dancing at Lughnasa* premiered in April 1990. Kate's fear of losing her job should have resonated with an Irish audience in 1990. Unemployment was at that time running at 13.3 percent, after a decade of serious job loss and redundancy (CSO, 2004a). Similarly, the decision of Agnes and Rose to flee Ireland, and their ultimate fate of poverty, alcoholism and homelessness, was a dramatization of the tragedy of Irish emigration, which in 1990 remained a major part of Irish life: in 1990, 56,300 people – or 1.6 percent of the entire population – left the Republic of Ireland. However, by 1999, Ireland had become a country of net migration, with 47,500 immigrants arriving to the country. This net migration has led to a major demographic shift in Ireland whereby one in ten people resident in the Republic of Ireland in 2002 was born outside the country. A large proportion of those

new arrivals come from Africa: in 1996, only 4,867 people living in Ireland had been born in Africa, but by 2002, that number had grown to 26,515 (CSO, 2004b). In relative terms, this is a small number, representing less than one percent of the entire population, but it is also an increase of over 600 percent in only six years, during which time the revival of *Lughnasa* was taking the abbey stage. This transformation created a new way of thinking about the treatment in *Lughnasa* of the relationship between Irish and African cultures, which moved from being a debate about postcolonial affinities between Ireland and Africa to becoming an actual social relationship being enacted on the streets of Dublin and other Irish cities or towns.

The representation of Father Jack was also potentially shocking in 1990. During the 1990s, a series of absurd or flawed priests would appear on the Irish stage. Father Welsh in McDonagh's *Leenane Trilogy* (1997) and Father Billy in Tom Murphy's *The Wake* (1998) are two prominent examples of an altered Irish attitude to religious authority, as is the appearance during the decade of the television series *Father Ted*. Keegan in Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island* (1904) appears to be a prototype of Father Jack; Friel himself had portrayed a rather ridiculous priest in *Living Quarters* (1975); and Synge had caricatured the Catholic priesthood in *The Tinkers Wedding* (published in 1907, although his play was not produced in Ireland until 1971). There were however few previous instances in Irish culture of a priest like Father Jack, who had rejected Catholicism not for theological reasons, but from a sense of its irrelevance, who recommends having "love children", and who appears to have had an intimate relationships with his "house boy", Okinawa. By 1999, however, the status of Catholic clergy in Ireland had altered radically. *Lughnasa* appeared two years before it was revealed that Bishop Eamon Casey had a son – an initially shocking revelation that would seem minor in relation to later revelations about institutional abuse of children and women by Irish clergy. So if in 1990, there was a risk of the characterization of Father Jack provoking controversy for appearing to denigrate the Catholic Church, by the end of the decade the reputation of the Church had so declined that any performer playing Jack had to work hard to gain sympathy from the audience for his character.

Another taboo of the early 1990s challenged by the play was its morally and ethically neutral presentation of single parenthood. Single-parent families in Ireland in 1990 accounted for 14.5 percent of all births in Ireland. Yet within Irish discourse, the "normal" – as well as the legal – family unit remained the traditional heterosexual

two-parent married family. Roddy Doyle's *The Snapper* (1991) was one of the first mainstream attempts to normalize the phenomenon of single parenthood within Irish culture. Friel's presentation of Chris and Michael disrupts contemporaneous notions of normality in a similar way to Doyle's novel: Chris's unmarried state is rarely mentioned and in no way problematized in the play. By 1999, however, single parenthood was considerably less controversial: when figures were counted in 2003 it was revealed that 31.4 percent of all births in the Republic of Ireland were to single and/or unmarried parents.

Furthermore, audiences in 1999 appear to have seen the play through their memories of *Riverdance*, a show to which *Lughnasa* is sometimes compared, and with which it is occasionally confused. The choreographer for the 1990 and 1999 productions of *Lughnasa* was Terry John Bates, who explains that for the latter production, he was forced to add more steps to the dance in the first act. "There were far more steps the second time because people *were expecting* the energy then. You had to satisfy the audience". He admits frankly that "I had to redo it again after *River Dance* [sic] again you know. The audience were conscious of *River Dance* – totally" (qtd. By Coult 2001; 195-6).

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the play focused on a group Irish women at a time when the status of women within Ireland was changing considerably. The play premiered six months before Mary Robinson became Ireland's first woman president, while Garry Hynes was appointed to the Artistic Directorship of the Abbey Theatre in 1991. The decade saw the emergence of many Irish women playwrights, the most important of whom is Marina Carr; and there was a general perception that the status of Irish women within both theatre and society had improved. This improvement was imperfect, however. Garry Hynes's tenure at the Abbey lasted only until 1993, and although women dominate many areas of Irish theatre, the majority of mainstream productions on the country's largest stages are by male playwrights. The 1990 production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* may have represented a celebration of female physicality, but the mobility of the play internationally contrasted starkly with state attempts to control female movement in Ireland during the decade. Such events as the February 1992 "X-Case", in which a fourteen-year-old girl who had been raped was prevented from traveling to England for an abortion, exemplify a confusion in Ireland about state control over the bodies of Irish women. If the 1990 dance scene in

*Lughnasa* was presented as celebratory, its 1999 revival ought to have been a reminder that much work remained to be done to protect the status of Irish women.

Yet the gender politics of Friel's play have received little attention. Friel's respected status in Irish letters appears to have made critics excessively inclined to read Michael as an onstage representative of the author himself, to see the play as being directly autobiographical in an uncomplicated sense. Friel's decision to put five strong women characters at the centre of his play is not unusual in world drama – one thinks of *The House of Bernarda Alba* or *Three Sisters* – but there had been few comparable examples of plays for, by, or about women in the Irish mainstream dramatic tradition before 1990. The possibility that the representation of the five Mundy sisters might have been equal to, or more important than, the narrative of the lone male did not seem to occur to many Irish commentators. This arose from the absence of an appropriate vocabulary in Irish criticism for describing work by and about women, which had been pointed out by Victoria White in an influential article published shortly before *Lughnasa* opened. Writing about Charabanc Theatre Company, which was established in Belfast in 1984 as a way of counteracting the absence of challenging and substantial roles for women, White suggests that the Irish media marginalized Charabanc “by concentrating on their being women”. Because Charabanc produced work by and for women, it was, White states, represented as “catering for a minority audience” (1989, 33), despite the fact that, as one of the company's founders Eleanor Methven points out, women represent “a minority of 52% of the world!” Charabanc were often referred to as “the best all-women theatre company in Ireland”, which as Methven points out, “wasn't much of a compliment”, since Charabanc was also the only all-woman theatre company in Ireland. “Why can't they just say we're one of the best theatre companies in Ireland?” she asks (1989, 34). In the year before *Lughnasa* premiered, many plays by Irish women appeared, such as Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy's *Women at Arms*; and the play's premiere coincided with a celebrated Gate Theatre *Three Sisters*, adapted by Frank McGuinness, and starring the three Cusack Sisters. Friel cannot be credited with changing the place of women on the Irish stage, but *Lughnasa* may be seen as one of the first examples of mainstream Irish theatre being affected by a process that had stretched back into the 1970s, when women such as Deirdre O'Connell, Garry Hynes, Lynne Parker, Marie Jones, Carol Moore, Eleanor Methven, and many others began to have a greater impact on drama in Ireland.

All of these changes can explain the sense of nostalgia towards Mason's production of *Lughnasa*: it seemed by 1999 to have emerged from an Ireland that was gone forever. Furthermore, many critics suggest that Irish audiences in the late 1990s needed to distance themselves from a perceived version of the country's past, as a way of asserting their growing sense of modernity – as has been argued in relation to the plays of Marina Carr and Martin McDonagh by Joe Cleary and Victor Merriman.

That sense of nostalgia is important, however, because it obscures the extent to which the script of *Lughnasa* could have been used to challenge many Irish taboos and problems, both in 1990 and 1999 – about priests, single-parent families, homelessness, unemployment, gender, emigration, and so on. It seems worth considering why these challenging aspects of the play went unremarked and unremembered. To consider that issue, I want to discuss the production that played at the Abbey in 1990, and which transferred to New York the following year.

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Catherine Byrne, who played Chris in the play's 1990 premiere and Agnes in its 1999 "Friel Festival" revival, states that Patrick Mason's *Lughnasa* was intended to be seen as a "golden production". "There's a bleak side to Brian's plays but he doesn't always like that highlighted", she explains. Mason's *Lughnasa* was "all golden corn and poppies, beautiful lighting; the women were colour-coordinated". "But", Byrne adds, "there's another production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* we haven't seen yet. We haven't seen how dark it is" (qtd by Coult 2003, 57).

Byrne's comments suggest that the direction and design of this "golden production" were intended to produce sentimental rather than genuinely emotional responses. The set design by Joe Vanek has now become iconic, presenting a field of corn that dominated the right of the stage, creating the impression of the Mundys' lives being played out against a landscape of abundance. This image could be said to work against Friel's script: while visually striking, Vanek's design may have worked against the play's frequent use of images of barrenness, impoverishment, and infertility. Such images pervade the action: *Lughnasa* is set at harvest-time, but represents a failure of regeneration. The Mundys are a family of six, which produces only one child. Two of the six will have left the family home within a year of the conclusion of the action; a third will have died. Furthermore, all of the sisters are

vulnerable to the risk of poverty: theirs after all is a household in which three eggs must be made to feed seven people (Friel 1999a, 88).

The lighting design by Trevor Dawson further obscures such themes. He used soft yellows and golds in his design, so the overall atmosphere created was of warmth and perpetual sunshine. The playing area was almost entirely open: the walls of the Mundys' house are not presented on stage, and no other structures dominate the space. This openness would have diminished the audience's sense that the sisters' lives were claustrophobic. Furthermore, a set in which none of the structures casts a shadow is unlikely to alert the audience to the possibility that there is an undertone of sadness and loss in the play.

Similarly, the sound design of *Lughnasa* has influenced its reception. Patrick Mason added a number of sound effects not included in the script, the purpose of which was to draw attention to the similarities between Ireland and Africa. A piece of African chant called "Celebration Dance" was played at the end of the first act and the beginning of the second to establish a relationship between Irish traditional music and African song, for example. Mason's most influential decision relates to his treatment of the dance in the first act. As Abbey Sound Director David Nowlan explains, a "major bone of contention for the show" was (as he revealingly terms it) the "big dance number". The "Mason's Reel", Nowlan states, is "quite a short tune and would have been very, very repetitive. So one of the musicians suggested a reel which is in the same key, called 'Miss Macleod's Reel', just to get into the whole excitement of 'The Mason's Apron'... We did it by doing a lot of bodhran over dubs, making it very, very heavy and percussive". Furthermore, says Nowlan, "another part of the brief was that Patrick wanted to give it a kind of African ethnic vibe. Brian quite liked that idea" (qtd by Coult 2003, 199). This direction by Mason of the dance scene contrasts strongly with Friel's own stage directions. The movements of the sisters should seem caricatured, Friel writes; the sound should be too loud, the beat too fast, and "the almost recognisable dance" should appear "grotesque" (1999, 36). He states that there should be "a sense of order consciously being subverted, of the women consciously and crudely caricaturing themselves, indeed of near-hysteria being produced" (36-7). However, as Patrick Burke points out, the intensification of the rhythmic aspects of the dance, when performed, worked against Friel's instructions:

In its premiere production at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, and subsequently in New York and London, that dance was generally lauded in terms of the energetically celebratory, an evaluation supported by the *joie de vivre* of the Chieftains' music which, anachronistically and counter to Friel's stage directions, accompanied it. Such an emphasis on celebration tended to ignore the text's emphasis on the ugly aspects of the dance (1997, 19).

Some of the casting and directing choices further skewed interpretations of the play. Kate was intended to be presented as a forty-year-old woman: her tragedy is that she has been classified as redundant by her society while still relatively young. The part was however originally performed by Frances Tomelty, who, contrary to the script, presented Kate as an elder woman, and delivered her lines in a histrionic manner, encouraging audiences to laugh at her character. Kate's romantic interest in Austin Morgan was, for example, presented as undignified and inherently absurd, instead of arising from a legitimate desire to form a relationship with someone whom she appears to respect. This part was subsequently taken over by Rosaleen Linehan, a respected actor who, nevertheless, is known mainly for comic roles. Irish audiences were probably predisposed to find Linehan funny before she appeared on stage, a problem to which the actor herself seems alert. Referring to "the nature of my temperament", Linehan admitted in 1999 that "there's a large streak of sarcastic wit" in her personality, which was also revealed in her performance of Kate. While *Lughnasa* was on tour in the United States, Friel approached Linehan to discuss this matter with her: "Just one thing, Rosaleen", he said. "I don't write irony". "That wiped out the performance for that week!" said Linehan, implying that her portrayal of Kate was "ironic" for every other week during the production's run (qtd by Coult 2003, 149). As a result, it may have been difficult for the original audiences of *Lughnasa* to attribute to Kate any qualities other than the superficial.

It might be easy to criticize Patrick Mason's decisions in relation to casting and design, but many of his choices were praised. His use of a beat on "The Mason's Apron" is regarded by many as a brilliant directorial choice, even if it overshadowed or undermined Friel's attempt to communicate a rejection of authority to his audience. Similarly, his casting of Tomelty and Linehan makes sense from a commercial perspective. Both were well known, respected actors in 1990-91, and it is customary

for Irish producers to manage the risks associated with premieres by emphasizing a play's humorous elements while curtailing any potentially offensive content.

It appears however that the darkness implicit in the play was not only ignored but that it may even have been suppressed, in favor of a less provocative presentation of the play; it seems also that it emphasized euphoric release where Friel wanted grotesque near hysteria, and that it made characters such as Kate appear ridiculous rather than sympathetic.

I would suggest that one reason for such decisions may be that the play was seen from an early stage as a strong candidate for commercial success and that, rather than producing the play in a way that would have been of exclusive interest to an Irish audience, the Abbey instead emphasized the qualities of the play likely to make it appealing internationally. The Broadway run of *Lughnasa* was produced by Noel Pearson, who brought to it an entrepreneurial spirit that drove the play to international fame: as Tony Roche points out, Pearson later portrayed the move from “Ballybeg to Broadway” as an inevitability (2006, 645). Pearson had been appointed to the Board of the Abbey in 1987, and acted as Artistic Director between 1989 and 1990. He explains that:

In 1987 I took over the Abbey and [Friel] wrote me a very warm letter and I asked him to give me a play. He gave me *Lughnasa* in 1988, two years before it moved to London. Nobody wanted it there. Nobody wanted it on Broadway, either, at first. An Irish play had not been successful there since [Hugh Leonard's] *Da* (qtd by Witchell 1993, 5).

The “golden” quality of the 1990 production may not have been a deliberate attempt to make the play commercially attractive, but those features of the production certainly appealed to audiences in London and New York Richard Cave has argued that these features of the production became increasingly exaggerated due to the audience's response in London (1999, 226).

What is interesting here is that the premiere of *Lughnasa* was not especially well received in Dublin, perhaps because the issues that would have been relevant to an Irish audience at that time (homelessness, poverty, emigration, etc) were not given much emphasis. Its reception was further conditioned by a number of significant events that coincided with its opening. *Lughnasa* was, for example, the first play to be

performed at the newly renovated Abbey Theatre. In the original Michael Scott design for the building, the theatre comprised a large concrete façade with small doors at the front. This aesthetic was intended to suggest that the theatre space was a kind of magic box; that, by peeking through the small opening of the doors, one might get a glimpse of amazing goings-on inside. In practice, most visitors to the theatre found the austerity of the façade alienating; rather than being encouraged to peek inside, they instead felt shut out. The theatre's 1989-1990 renovations were an attempt to address some of the resultant criticism. The Abbey's management wanted to present the theatre as more relevant to its community and country, and the new façade was a physical manifestation of this desire for openness: a new bar area with a windows overlooking Abbey Street exposed the theatre to public view. The new façade attracted a great deal of public attention and discussion; indeed, much of the pre-publicity for *Lughnasa* focused more on the building than the play<sup>2</sup>. For these reasons, audiences for *Lughnasa* would have been predisposed to read the play in the context of the celebratory atmosphere associated with the reopening of the building.

Another important factor in the reception of the play was Friel's decision not to offer it to Field Day, which had produced four of his previous five works. Friel explained his movement away from Field Day as an attempt to prevent his work from being "associated with institutions or directors. I don't want a tandem to develop. Institutions are inclined to enforce characteristics, impose an attitude or a voice or a response. I think you're better to keep away from all that. It's for that reason that I didn't give *Dancing at Lughnasa* to Field Day" (Friel 1999b, 104-5). This decision was characterized as a departure from Field Day (although Friel's resignation from the company did not formally occur until 1994), and hence as a move away from the overtly political work in which he had been engaged since 1980. This may have had the effect of discouraging audiences and critics from attempting political readings of the play, or of considering the play in the context of Friel's earlier work.

Material in the Friel archive shows that the play was certainly liked – there is some interesting fan mail from Bono and Christy Moore, among others (NLI MS 37.106.1) –but it was by no means treated as a contemporary masterpiece: ticket sales were respectable, but the production rarely appears to have reached full attendance (NLI MS 37.106.3). The critical response was similarly mixed. *The Evening Press* paid most attention to the play's running time, noting with mild disapproval that it did not end until 10.25 (a mere half hour before pub closing time). *The Independent*

declared that it was a “many layered sandwich – but it lacks real meat”, and the Irish edition of *The Guardian*, damning with faint praise, stated that “it will be a play loved in Ireland”<sup>3</sup>. Fintan O’Toole, writing in *The Irish Times*, was generally positive about the play, but criticized Friel’s characterization of Father Jack, whom he saw as a “metaphorical version of a Field Day pamphlet” (2003, 95).

It was not until *Lughnasa* transferred in November 1990 to the Royal National Theatre in London that Irish reactions towards the play became more positive. “The Abbey Stuns the South Bank”, declared *The Sunday Independent* while *The Irish Times* approvingly noted that London “Raves for Friel Play”. However, it was the transfer of the play to Broadway in 1991 that cemented its reputation. There was huge excitement in Ireland about the New York run even before *Lughnasa* opened there. The Abbey’s Martin Fahy enthusiastically told the media that “if *Dancing at Lughnasa* gets a good reception from the New York critics, Brian Friel will never again have to buy another Lotto ticket” – a nice reminder of an Ireland where the only way to make a million was by winning the Lotto or going to Broadway (ATA). Dublin’s Lord Mayor hosted a civic reception at the Mansion House to celebrate the transfer of *Lughnasa* to Broadway a full nine months before it opened there. The Taoiseach Charles Haughey sent a personalized fax to the cast on the Broadway opening night (NLI MS 37). RTE’s Arts Show dedicated a special edition to the New York production. *Irish Times* readers were invited to enter a competition to win tickets for two to see *Lughnasa* in New York for Christmas 1991<sup>4</sup>. And in November of that year, one month after the play opened here in New York – but 18 months after it had premiered in Dublin – a distinctly uncomfortable looking Friel appeared on the front page of Ireland’s newspapers, seated beside Charles Haughey at the “People of the Year” awards, at which he’d been one of the winners<sup>5</sup>.

This enthusiasm continued for most of the play’s Broadway run, with regular media updates telling the Irish public which magazines had interviewed or profiled Friel, which celebrities had attended the Broadway production, and how much better the Irish actors were than the American cast who took over from them in 1992. In short, Friel generated far more excitement by bringing *Lughnasa* to Broadway than he had done by producing it in Ireland.

The only person who seemed uncomfortable with this was Friel himself. Accepting his Tony Award for Best Play in 1992, he expressed ambivalence about the reception of his play by alluding to Graham Greene’s comment that “success is only

the postponement of failure” (qtd by PGIL 2002). With his next play, *Wonderful Tennessee* (1994), Friel presented a set of characters who were almost completely static to an audience expecting more dance. *Molly Sweeney* (1994) portrays the negative consequences when a visually impaired woman has her sight restored, and thus may be seen as a dramatization of the proposition that success is the postponement of a failure. Crucially, in this play, Friel gives us another dance scene, this time ensuring, through his use of monologue, that no-one will misinterpret his intentions:

As soon as Tom played the last note of “The Lament for Limerick”, I found myself on my feet in the middle of the sitting-room and calling, “A hornpipe, Tom! A mad, fast hornpipe!”. And the moment he began to play, I shouted – screamed, “Now watch me! Just you watch me!”. And in a rage of anger and defiance I danced and wild and furious dance round and round that room; then out to the hall; then back to the kitchen; then back to the room again and round it a third time. Mad and wild and frenzied.... It must have been terrifying to watch, because when I stopped, the room was hushed (1994, 31-2).

*Give Me Your Answer, Do!* (1997) might also be seen as a reaction against – or as contrasting with – the perception that *Lughnasa* was a joyful play. *Give Me Your Answer* is shockingly frank in its treatment of authorial fear about reception, presenting a writer whose child cannot speak for herself, and whose (commodified) work is being evaluated for inclusion in an American archive, with the success of the deal hinging on the author’s revelation that he has secretly written two pornographic novels. It cannot be assumed that Friel was commenting directly in these works on the misinterpretation of *Lughnasa*, but it is notable that his subsequent plays diverge from any expectation that might have been generated by the production of *Lughnasa*.

Subsequent Irish productions of *Lughnasa* have attempted to tackle the script’s darker elements: there was a Belfast production directed by Friel’s nephew Conall Morisson in 1995, a Joe Dowling production at the Gate in 2005, a very successful version from An Grianan in Donegal in 2002, and an Irish language version called *Damhsa ag Lughnasa* which toured Ireland in 2001. So we are beginning to see productions that are closer to Friel’s script. Yet audiences’ ideas about *Lughnasa* persist.

I would suggest that the cause of this continued misinterpretation of Friel's play arises because the international success of *Lughnasa* occurred at one of those periods when the performance of Irishness on the international stage is extremely important within the country itself. Ireland's delight with the international success of *Lughnasa* did not happen in isolation, but was part of a growing awareness of the country's status in relation to the rest of the world. Shortly after the premiere of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the Irish football team took part in the 1990 Football World Cup, the first for which a team from the Republic of Ireland had qualified. That team included second and third-generation expatriates, and crossed religious and ethnic divides; its fans believed that they had distinguished themselves for their good behavior and good humor, which contrasted (they were told) with the hooliganism of their English neighbors. The performance on the world stage of an inclusive and admirable Irish identity created a sense of national confidence, which is encapsulated well by Dermot Bolger's *In High Germany* (1990) and Roddy Doyle's *The Van* (1992). In 1991, Dublin became Europe's "City of Culture", and the resulting influx of tourists and exuberant media commentary again focused Irish attention on the status of the country abroad. This association of national self-importance with the perception of people abroad dominated the 1990s, and appears to have affected Irish audiences' attitudes to *Lughnasa*. The generally mixed reviews for the play's 1990 premiere were forgotten after it achieved success overseas; its return to the Abbey in 1992, and its subsequent Irish tour were wildly popular. *Lughnasa* toured the world, and Ireland, until 1993. The celebration of the place of Irish culture internationally gained momentum even as *Lughnasa* stepped away from the Abbey stage. Roddy Doyle won the Booker Prize for *Paddy Clarke, Ha, Ha, Ha* in 1994, and Seamus Heaney won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995.

It thus appears to be the case that *Lughnasa* required international endorsement before it was unreservedly admitted into the Irish dramatic canon. In this respect, it might be seen as similar to previous Irish plays, such as *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), *A Whistle in the Dark* (1961), and *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964). What distinguishes *Lughnasa* is that its international success occurred at a time when Irish culture in its entirety was redefining its relationship with the rest of the world, so that the play's success was not seen as an isolated phenomenon, but as part of a number of Irish successes during the 1990s. This celebratory approach to Irish writing was unlikely to lead commentators to suggest that *Lughnasa* had been

misinterpreted in some respects. This may explain the fact that the revival of *Dancing at Lughnasa* in 1999 was seen as a celebration, not just of Friel's seventieth birthday, but also of the international triumph of the play.

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The production history of *Dancing at Lughnasa* is an example of the growing impact of the ideology associated with private business on Irish theatre: the key concept for an understanding of the reception of the play in Ireland is *mobility*. The play was considered more valuable when it traveled, and was given canonical status within Ireland only when it was endorsed abroad. Irish commentators could not declare the play to be a success until it had been a success internationally, indicating an insecurity about the relative value of Irish critical judgments. Yet the play became mobile only by removing or moderating those aspects of it that might have engaged directly with Irish life. In its 1990 premiere, its humorous and sentimental qualities were emphasized at the expense of the way in which its script engages with contemporary Irish life. In both 1990 and 1999, its dance scene was presented as emancipatory and celebratory, rather than as a refusal of order, or an expression of claustrophobia. In order for the play to become mobile, the production first had to divest itself of those elements that might have made it a more substantial and rewarding experience for specifically Irish audiences.

This means that we have tended to forget or neglect many important elements of the play's original production – including two interesting aspects of it that pertain to the relationship between Irish theatre and America. The first is that, while *Dancing at Lughnasa* was being performed on the Abbey's mainstage, *The Glass Menagerie* was being produced downstairs in the Peacock, directed by Friel's daughter Judy<sup>6</sup>. There are many obvious similarities between the two works. Both involve women living in restrictive, claustrophobic environments. Both are set in 1936 to the backdrop of the Spanish Civil War, locating a claustrophobic and hemmed-in social setting within a global context. Both involve a male character who represents the "long-delayed but always expected something that we live for" (1970, 23). Both are narrated by someone who does not witness many of the scenes he describes. Furthermore, *The Glass Menagerie* defines a memory play for Friel's purposes: "In memory", writes Williams, "everything seems to happen to music" (23), a line that Friel reproduces almost directly in his own play (107). The relationship between the

productions of *Lughnasa* and *The Glass Menagerie* is dialogic: Friel draws from Williams, but *Lughnasa* allows a deeper understanding of *The Glass Menagerie*. Moreover, the Abbey's decision to present these two plays in partnership illustrates its sense of the importance of international work for Irish theatre, both in production and in dramaturgy

Another significant feature of the production was that its American rights were licensed to Ferndale Theatre Productions, a private company owned by Noel Pearson and others. Although the production was billed as "the Abbey Theatre on tour", it was in fact a product from a private enterprise that had effectively leased the Abbey brand for marketing purposes. This exposed Pearson to the accusation that he had abused his position as acting director of the Abbey for financial gain, at a time when the theatre was undergoing a period of financial crisis. Pearson was called before the Public Accounts Committee to explain his involvement in the American tour, and there was also an internal investigation by the Abbey's auditors and solicitor – in which it was found that nothing improper had occurred. Even so, it should be noted that the international success of *Lughnasa* was of little financial benefit to the Abbey, due to decisions made by the Artistic Director who would later produce the international tour. The long-term significance of this is that it set an important precedent, establishing that, as a theatre in receipt of public funds, the Abbey should not expose itself to the financial risks associated with a Broadway production; it also blurred the lines between private interests and the national remit of the Abbey. This issue has persisted since that time, most recently in the controversial staging of *The Shaughraun* at the Abbey by *Riverdance* director and Abbey board member John McColgan, which transferred to London's West End in 2005 and which had been scheduled to tour in the United States from 2007.

These issues also highlight the different ways in which it becomes possible to think of the performance of Irishness abroad. The success of *Dancing at Lughnasa* in the United States may be related to the way in which it appeals to international audiences' expectations about Irish drama (an issue discussed in more detail by Christina Hunt Mahony elsewhere in this publication). Yet we might also see the presence of *Lughnasa* on the American stage as another form of performance: as a sign to Irish audiences that the national culture has value, as a sign that Ireland itself might take an equal place on the world stage. The meaning of *Lughnasa* to the Irish public does not therefore arise from Friel's script, nor directly from Mason's

production. Instead, the status of the play arises from Irish audiences' understanding of the success of its American production.

*Dancing at Lughnasa* may be understood as a play in which several attempts at communication are made, but none of them adequately. The radio always breaks down, presenting a disembodied musical performance to which the sisters respond physically. Jack's sentences will always fizzle out, Gerry will continue to be "unbelievable", and Michael will never answer when his aunts call for him. Michael the narrator will try to hold his characters in tableau at the play's conclusion, but those characters will move as he talks; Kate will cry throughout his final speech. It is ironic that this play about a failure to communicate would itself be so widely misunderstood. The production history of *Lughnasa* shows that the play's value was determined not by its reception in Ireland but by its mobility. Just as Martin McDonagh would joke in *The Cripple of Inishmaan* that Ireland can't be such a bad place if sharks want to go there, there's a sense in which *Lughnasa* on Broadway was used to suggest to the Irish public that Ireland can't be such a bad place if Americans – especially famous ones – want to see our plays. That is of course significant, but it provides a very limited sense of what the relationship between these two countries' theatres was, and might be.

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<sup>1</sup> Comments about the productions of *Dancing at Lughnasa* arise from my attendance at performances of the Abbey production in 1991, 1993, 1999, and 2000, and from viewing of videotaped performances of the 1990 and 2000 productions at the Abbey Theatre Archive. Further references to the Abbey Theatre Archive are included parenthetically in the text, indicated by the acronym ATA.

<sup>2</sup> Photographs of the new building appeared on the front pages of both the *Irish Independent* 13 March 1990, p 1 and *The Irish Times*, 13 March, p 1.

<sup>3</sup> *The Evening Press*, 25 April 1990, p 5. *The Irish Independent*, 25 April 1990, p. 11. *The Guardian*, 1 May 1990, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Sunday Independent, “The Abbey Stuns South Bank”, *Sunday Independent*, 21 October 1990. *The Irish Times*, “Raves for Friel Play”, *The Irish Times*, 20 October 1990. Julie Kavanagh, “Friel at Last”, *Vanity Fair*, 21 October 1991. *The Sunday Business Post* article appeared on 3 November 1991. The figure quoted was inaccurate – the actual amount predicted was \$75,000. *The Irish Times* readers’ competition was held in November 1991.

<sup>5</sup> See for example *Irish Times*, 24 November 1991, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Murray (1997) and Fintan O’Toole (1997) both remark on the similarities between *The Glass Menagerie* and *Dancing at Lughnasa*.