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Digging around in the past for a glimpse of the future;

DIGGING FOR FIRE BY DECLAN HUGHES

Back in 2000, Declan Hughes published one of the most important essays yet written about contemporary Irish drama. Adopting a trenchant tone right from the start by calling the article “Who The Hell Do We Think We Still Are?”, Hughes set out to argue that there was something terribly wrong with theatre in this country.

Why, he asked, do so many dramatists write plays that are set in nostalgic versions of rural Ireland? In a nation that was rapidly changing with the onset of the Celtic Tiger, our theatre-makers were still using an exhausted repertoire of images. “Even if we do it in an iconoclastic way, the iconography remains powerfully the same,” Hughes complained: “half-door, pint bottle, sacred heart”. Impatient with the multitude of Irish plays that were set in pubs and country kitchens, Hughes suggested that the Irish stage wasn’t confronting our present because of cowardice: “we fear [that] the set of identities we have for ourselves won’t add up any more. And foolishly, we think the fear is better avoided than faced,” he asserted.

For many readers, Hughes’s words had the force of a manifesto: he was calling for an Irish drama that would engage with the country that we actually live in – a drama that would force us to face uncomfortable truths. And importantly, he was also providing an insight into his own thinking as a writer: to read his article now is to understand why Hughes has spent more than twenty years writing plays that are unlike anything else on the Irish stage.

That distinctiveness and willingness to be provocative were evident in *Digging for Fire*, Hughes’s breakthrough play – which is now getting a long overdue revival by Rough Magic, the company that premiered it in 1991.

On the surface, *Digging for Fire* might seem like other Irish plays. Its emotional high-point involves a woman dancing alone, an image that may remind audiences of Brian Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa*. And in its presentation of a group of twenty-somethings who grapple with emigration, loneliness, and alcohol abuse, it readily evokes memories of Tom Murphy’s great dramas.

Yet in its 1991 premiere *Digging for Fire* was also doing something profoundly innovative. It gave audiences a Dublin we could recognize: Hughes had created characters whose tastes and language matched our own. There was a frankness about the play – about sex and sexuality, the Troubles, gender and pornography, and more – that felt startling, urgent and true.

Hughes’s Ireland was also outward-looking: his characters spoke about New York as if it was a much more familiar place than Friel’s Ballybeg. And the cultural references seemed pointedly relevant: the original production featured a debate about Bret Easton Ellis’s controversial novel *American Psycho*, for instance.

Then there was the brilliant music. The play takes its name from a song by the American alternative rock group Pixies (described by this newspaper as “the coolest band in the universe” when they played at the Point Depot shortly before *Digging*

premiered). It also features tracks from REM, Iggy and the Stooges, the Sex Pistols, Tom Waits, and, most memorably, New Order. In the Irish dramatic tradition, writers like Friel and Murphy had often integrated music into their plays for emotional impact; here Hughes was doing something similar, but using songs that were international, contemporary, and vigorously iconoclastic.

Those traits also dominated Hughes's most recent play, *The Last Summer*, which appeared at the Gate during the 2012 Dublin Theatre Festival. Drawing on everything from *The Great Gatsby* to the music of Rush, Hughes offered one of the best explorations of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland to date – showing us how we got to where we are, but also offering us hope for the future.

It's important to say, though, that Hughes was challenging the orthodoxies of the Celtic Tiger period long before any other dramatist. His 2003 play *Shiver* argued that rapid enrichment had made Ireland an unpleasant place: materialistic, vulgar, casually racist, smug. It also predicted that the Celtic Tiger would come to a sorry end. If, as Hughes contends, too many Irish dramatists focus on the past, *Shiver* showed that the best theatre can have the capacity to anticipate the future – and thus to warn us about it.

Since 1991, then, Hughes's career as a dramatist has shown us things about Ireland that we can recognize as being true – even if we might sometimes wish to ignore those realities.

But does *Digging for Fire* have anything new to say? The revival's director Matt Torney believes so. "Rough Magic did a reading of the play as part of its twenty-fifth anniversary celebrations [in 2009]," he explains. "And it created a huge buzz, particularly among the younger generation". Torney is convinced that the play is still relevant: that its themes of "unfulfilled dreams, political disillusionment, and faith in friendship" will resonate as strongly today as they did in 1991. "This is a new production which is attempting to talk to the present moment," says Torney – and by doing so it will, like all of Hughes's plays, "start a dialogue about the future."

So the revival of *Digging for Fire* offers an opportunity to enjoy a play that is cosmopolitan, intellectually lively, political, funny, and provocative. And it therefore provides the chance to reconsider the question Hughes posed over a decade ago: why aren't there more Irish plays like this one?

ENDS

Bio – if needed: Patrick Lonergan directs the Drama programmes at NUI Galway

The play runs at **Project Arts Centre from April 22 – May 4.**

Songs featured

- * Dig for Fire – Pixies
- * Pretty Vacant – The Sex Pistols
- * No Fun – Iggy and the Stooges
- * Cecilia Ann – Pixies

- * Near Wild Heaven – REM
- * All Over the World - Pixies
- * Rainbirds – Tom Waits
- * True Faith – New Order