

ABSTRACT

A Director's Approach to *Dancing at Lughnasa*

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This thesis details the production process for Baylor Theatre's mainstage production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* by Brian Friel, directed by Heidi Breeden, in partial fulfillment of the Master of Fine Arts in Directing. *Dancing at Lughnasa* is a somewhat autobiographical memory play, featuring strong roles for women and requiring advanced acting skills. This thesis first investigates the life and works of Brian Friel, then offers a director's analysis of the text, documents the director's process for the production, and finally offers a reflection on the strengths and opportunities for improvement for the director's future work.

A Director's Approach to *Dancing at Lughnasa*

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A Thesis

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CHAPTER ONE

Playwright and Play

The Life and Legacy of Brian Friel

Brian Friel is arguably the best-known Irish playwright of his generation. Any study of an Irish writer must begin with the tumultuous political history of the island, which has informed the majority of Irish literature since the nation's inception. The social climate of Ireland has been wrought with political unrest due to conflicting feelings over the issue of the country's partition, which in 1921 divided the island into the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland. While the original intention of the division was to create two states under the United Kingdom, the Irish War of Independence and subsequent Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1922 officially established the Irish Free State, leaving Northern Ireland alone under the control of the United Kingdom. Friel's parents were among the minority nationalists who advocated for unification of Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State (known now as Ireland), and cutting ties with the United Kingdom. However, the unionists in Northern Ireland were (and remain) powerful enough to prevent unification.

Brian Patrick Friel was born in Omagh, County Tyrone, in Northern Ireland on January 9, 1929 to Patrick Friel, a schoolmaster and nationalist activist, and Mary Christina McLoone Friel, a postmistress from Glenties, Ireland. The Friel family lived in Omagh until he was about ten years old, when they moved to Derry, a much more populated town in Northern Ireland. Friel's formal schooling began at Long Tower (primary) School, where his father was schoolmaster, and continued at St. Columb's

(secondary) School. Friel, like the majority of the Northern Ireland nationalists, was raised Catholic.

The vast majority of the powerful unionist population in Northern Ireland is Anglo-Saxon Protestant, while Ireland is a predominantly Catholic nation. In fact, much of the enduring disagreement over unification of the island concerns religion. Ireland's 1937 constitution is written from a Catholic perspective. This intertwining with the Catholic Church, whose ideas are at times antithetical to the majority of the Protestant ideals held in the North, is reason enough for the unionists to continue their opposition to unification. Certainly Friel was well aware of these concerns in 1945 when he chose to pursue the priesthood and entered St. Patrick's College, Maynooth.

Although Friel did not struggle academically, he found the environment at St. Patrick's to be ideologically constrictive. In a 1964 interview with Peter Lennon, Friel referred to his time at Maynooth as "an awful experience. It nearly drove me cracked. It is one thing I want to forget"¹ After two years of study, Friel withdrew from Maynooth and redirected his career path to align with his father's; Friel began teacher training at St. Joseph's College.

In 1950, Friel took a teaching position at Christian Brothers' school in Derry. Friel was married to Anne Morrison in 1954 and afterwards continued working as an educator in primary and intermediate schools until 1960. In a 1972 essay entitled "Self Portrait," Friel is candid about the difficulties of his experience as a teacher. Friel confesses that he regrets the decade he spent teaching, suggesting that while he thought he was teaching, he was in actuality preparing boys for math exams. Further, Friel

¹ Brian Friel, qtd in Peter Lennon, "In Interview with Peter Lennon," in *Brian Friel: Essays, Diaries, and Interviews*, ed. Christopher Murray (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1999), 1.

confesses that “I regret, too, that I used a strap. Indeed I regret this most of all. It’s a ghost I have called up many a time since, but he still won’t be atoned to. I suppose he’s right.”² While he was teaching, Friel began to write and publish short stories. His first publication was a 780-word story entitled “The Child,” which was published in 1952 in the Irish literary magazine *The Bell*.³ This story, although brief, touched upon themes which would become hallmarks of Friel’s work: place, family, and spirituality. Like many Irish writers, Friel found that his stories were more likely to be published in America, so he began sending his work overseas. By 1959, Friel had a contract with the *New Yorker*, which enabled him to resign from his teaching position in 1960 and dedicate himself to writing full time.

Friel’s short stories in the *New Yorker* caught the attention of renowned British theatre director Sir Tyrone Guthrie. Within two years of beginning his contract with *The New Yorker*, Friel received a fan letter from Guthrie, who had been living in County Monaghan, Ireland, and the two soon met and became friends.⁴ As Friel’s career progressed, he began writing radio plays for the BBC, and this led to him writing stage plays. Friel’s friendship with Guthrie would ultimately become the catalyst to his success in the theatre.

Unlike many theatre practitioners, Friel was largely unfamiliar with the theatre world before he began writing plays. His only work in the theatre had been with professional companies producing his scripts. With no theatrical education, limited

² Brian Friel, “Self-Portrait,” in *Brian Friel: Essays, Diaries, and Interviews*, ed. Christopher Murray (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1999), 41.

³ Ulf Dantanus, *Brian Friel: A Study* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1988), 23.

⁴ Mel Gussow, “In Interview with Mel Gussow (1991),” in *Brian Friel: Essays, Diaries, and Interviews*, ed. Christopher Murray (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1999), 143.

experience in the field, and low confidence in his work up to that point, Friel took advantage of an opportunity to work and study with Guthrie. In 1962, Friel, along with his wife and children, traveled to Minneapolis, Minnesota, where construction of the famed Guthrie Theatre had just been completed.

Observation of the opening production of the Guthrie Theatre proved inspiring for Friel, who speaks of his time at the Guthrie as training: “I learned about the physical elements of plays, how they are designed, built, landscaped. I learned how actors thought, how they approached a text, their various ways of trying to realize it. I learned a great deal about the iron discipline of theatre, and I discovered a dedication, and a nobility, and a selflessness that one associates with a theoretical priesthood.”⁵ In observing Guthrie’s work with actors, Friel took note of the collaborative nature of the work, writing in 1963 that

Director and cast worked in such intimate communication, so intensely, so vibrantly, so fluidly, that the distinction between director and directed seemed to disappear...So that the scene suddenly matured in meaning and significance and beauty, and there was captured a realization of something much deeper and more satisfying than the conscious mind of the author had ever known.⁶

Friel seems to have taken many of his ideals about what constitutes quality theatre from Guthrie, who shared Friel’s preference for high artistic quality over potential for high ticket sales. For both artists, the content and message of the play was far more important than appealing to tourist markets. Thus, both Guthrie and Friel tended to prefer staging their work not in theatrical hotspots like the West End or Broadway, but in

⁵ Friel, “Self Portrait,” 42.

⁶ Brian Friel qtd. in Joe Dowling, “Remembering the Extraordinarily Empathetic and Collaborative Brian Friel,” *American Theatre*, October 15, 2015, <http://www.americantheatre.org/2015/10/15/remembering%ADthe%ADextraordinarily%ADempathic%ADand%ADcollaborative%ADbrian%ADfriel/3/4>.

communities with demonstrated interest in the arts as a means of cultivating education and connection. Finally, Friel's time in Minneapolis provided the confidence to trust his own voice and, as he wrote in a 1995 letter to Guthrie Theatre Artistic Director, Joe Dowling, Friel's first true theatrical success, *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* "would never have been written had I not been an apprentice there under the great Tyrone Guthrie. Indeed, it was the first thing I wrote in a state of near giddiness when I came back to Ireland, still on a Guthrie high."⁷ *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* premiered at the Gaiety Theatre as a part of the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1964, and transferred to Broadway's Helen Hayes Theatre in 1966. It is generally agreed by scholars that *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* represented a major turning point for Friel's theatrical career and for contemporary Irish drama. It was around this time that Friel shifted his focus away from short stories and to almost exclusively writing for the theatre. Friel scholar Anthony Roche has suggested that a reason for this commitment to playwriting was that for Friel, "the ground-breaking precedent of *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* [provided] evidence to suggest that he might do much to advance the possibilities of Irish theatre."⁸ Whether or not Friel truly felt this way, Roche was correct about Friel's potential.

After the play premiered in 1964, Friel became a household name in Irish theatrical and literary circles. His works were regularly produced in professional theatres including the Gaiety and Abbey theatres in Dublin from the 1960s until his death in 2015. Since his time at the Guthrie, Friel's approach to new play production was characterized by a mutually respectful, if cautious, relationship between producing company and

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Anthony Roche, "Friel and Synge: Towards a Theatrical Language," *Irish University Review* 29:1 (1999): 147.

playwright. He held no allegiances to specific directors or companies (including Field Day, the company he founded). This intentional isolation was at least in part an effort to avoid becoming dependent on a creative team to produce quality work. Further, Friel said in an interview with theatre critic Mel Gussow that to become loyal to a single creative team could lead to a playwright developing “a dependence, a comfort, a house style.”⁹ Friel elaborated that a playwright must “maintain [their] freedom, [their] individuality.”¹⁰ For Friel, the play was his and his alone to create, and it was the actors’ job to interpret his script, which he likened to an orchestral score, complete with “musical notations... we call them stage directions.”¹¹ Even the position of director was suspect to Friel, who said “I’ve no interest whatever in [the director’s] concept or interpretation. I think it’s almost a bogus career.”¹² Friel was chiefly interested, then, in the protection of his work, and after *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, he had the clout to demand such protection. In order to maintain the integrity of his work, Friel attended every rehearsal for the first production of each new play he wrote. Once the production opened, Friel did not attend performances, assured that the director had been “‘obedient’ to the play.”¹³

Friel suggested in an interview with Gussow that this separation from the play late in the production process was an intentional effort to keep the inherent self-centeredness of being a playwright at bay, citing an anecdote about Ibsen carrying a mirror in his hat as

⁹ Friel qtd. in Gussow, “In Interview with Mel Gussow,” 147.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Gussow, “From Ballybeg to Broadway,” in *Brian Friel in Conversation*, ed. Paul Delaney (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 210.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

an example of this toxic narcissism which was to be avoided.¹⁴ In spite of his suspicion of directors and doubt of the necessity of their profession, Friel did seem to understand that once a play had been developed, it was no longer in his hands.¹⁵ Be that as it may, Friel's meticulous watch over his work on the Irish stage paid off in producing plays that earned him national recognition and accolades.

Friel was elected to the Irish Academy of Letters in 1972 and was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Literature by the University of Ireland in 1983. In 1987, Prime Minister Charles Haughey appointed Friel to the Irish Senate. According to Friel scholar Richard Pine, Friel was appointed because Haughey specifically wanted "a northerner, a man of great cultural eminence and one with significant cross-border activity"¹⁶ in the senate. Friel served until 1989, and although he attended sessions regularly, he reportedly never spoke in one. In addition to his high profile in Ireland, Friel's work garnered him international recognition.

Although he did achieve international success, this was never Friel's goal. His multiple successes on London's West End and on Broadway had little impact on his perception of his own success. Friel confessed to interviewer Desmond Rushe that he was "not at all proud of having successes on Broadway, because it is of no importance

¹⁴ Ibid., 210-11.

¹⁵ It should be noted that there was at least one production of *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* in recent history which made substantial changes to Friel's script, ultimately causing Friel to withdraw the rights to the play. See: <http://ticket.heraldtribune.com/2014/01/31/asolo-faces-criticism-for-altering-a-living-playwrights-work-in-philadelphia/>

¹⁶ Richard Pine, "Brian Friel Obituary," *The Guardian*, October 2, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/oct/02/brian-friel>.

whatever.”¹⁷ When questioned about the financial benefits of Broadway success, Friel responded that this was inconsequential, given the fact that he is not inclined to live in extravagance. In contrast to the expected markers of success, Friel’s measure of personal success has always been “that this particular work is in tune with the body of his previous work; that it is a forward step in the *revelation of his relationship with his own world*, and that at the time of writing, the idea and the form are coincidental and congruent and at one.”¹⁸ Friel’s measure of success is in direct correlation to the work’s connection with his community. It is this commitment to community that inspired Friel to partner with actor/director Stephen Rea to form Field Day Theatre Company in 1980.

Field Day was strategically based in Derry, Northern Ireland, which is located near the Irish border. It is worthy of note that Field Day received government funding from both Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. One of the company’s chief aims was to build community among the disenfranchised Irish and Northern Irish people. In an interview for an episode of the BBC’s arts documentary series, *Arena*, Irish correspondent for *The Observer*, Mary Holland, explained that Field Day was “trying to forge some new sense of cultural identity for Irish people which is free both of the influence of London and Britain and England but also equally free from ... the very dangerous mythologies that seem to come, in a way, from the nationalist tradition of the south.”¹⁹ Holland elaborated that Field Day artists were “trying to create a space in which people can think about how they can come to terms in their own identity with the very

¹⁷ Brian Friel, qtd. in Desmond Rushe, “In Interview with Desmond Rushe (1970), in *Brian Friel: Essays, Diaries, and Interviews*, ed. Christopher Murray (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1999), 30.

¹⁸ Friel, “Self Portrait,” 43.

¹⁹ *Arena*, “History Boys on the Rampage,” directed by Andrew Eaton, BBC, December 16, 1988.

stark and brutal and painful realities with which they've been presented by twenty years of violence in the north."²⁰ Further, Field Day was attempting to illuminate "the compromises that are going to have to be made, the acceptance of the other person's point of view, the other person's tradition, which they hold very strongly, and they've tried to reconcile those in some new way and which takes both of them on board."²¹

Field Day's primary tactic in building community was telling the individual stories of the people involved in great moments of Irish history, as opposed to providing historically accurate reenactments of historical events. In a succinct justification of this individualized narrative-based approach, Friel's play, *Making History*, poses the question, "Isn't that what history is—a kind of storytelling?"²² Field Day was not concerned with documenting the facts of history canonized in history books in order to reify an ideal definitive Irishness, but was instead concerned with crafting stories of the people who experienced this history in order to examine individual experiences of Irishness.

The Field Day priority of individual experience over historical accuracy is interrogated in a study by Ondřej Pilný published in *Litteraria Pragensia*, which suggests that Field Day rejects Irish metanarratives for the purpose of giving voice to "a plurality of individual narratives."²³ Field Day was about legitimizing multiple perspectives which acknowledged the particularly challenging social climate in Northern Ireland and looked

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Brian Friel, *Making History* (New York: Samuel French, 1989), 19.

²³ Ondřej Pilný, "Narrative and Communication: The Case of Brian Friel and Field Day," *Litteraria Pragensia* 10:20 (2000): 34.

to “critique ... certain stereotypes pertinent to the Irish situation.”²⁴ Pilný’s argument is strengthened by Seamus Deane, who wrote in one of the many pamphlets published by Field Day that “a literature predicated on an abstract idea of essence – Irishness or Ulsterness – will inevitably degenerate into whimsy and provincialism.”²⁵ Pilný points out that although this is a noble goal, it was virtually unattainable due to the fact that by embracing multiple individual narratives in place of national mythologies, Field Day was by definition simply writing a new metanarrative to encompass all of Irish culture. Agreement with or rejection of Pilný’s assessment notwithstanding, scholar Martine Pelletier correctly asserts that “throughout the 1980s... Field Day set the critical agenda in Irish studies.”²⁶ Ultimately, Field Day began the postcolonial analysis of Irish literature, especially through Deane, which has become standard practice. This was achieved through productions of plays by Irish playwrights as well as publication of pamphlets outlining the Field Day ideology and three anthologies of Irish literature.

Friel wrote a total of three original plays and one translation for Field Day between the company’s inception in 1980 and 1988. While *Making History* (1988) was Friel’s final production for Field Day, he did not completely sever ties with the company until he resigned from the Board of Directors in 1994.

The precise reason for Friel’s disassociation from Field Day has been the subject of speculation. Given Friel’s general discomfort with the limelight, it is possible that he became unable to cope with the attention he received as a founding member of Field Day.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Seamus Deane, “Heroic Styles: The Tradition of an Idea,” in *Ireland’s Field Day* (London: Hutchinson, 1985), 57.

²⁶ Martine Pelletier, “Translations and the Field Day Debate,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Brian Friel*, ed. Anthony Roche (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 74.

Friel has famously made reference to the necessary dual life of the artist, who must reside in both public and private realms: “the artistic self demands privacy, demands secrecy, it demands introversion... The public sense demands effort, engagement.”²⁷ It seems that the most likely reason for Friel’s cutting of ties with Field Day was a personal need to get out of the public eye and, according to Richard Pine, to reclaim some degree of personal freedom.

Friel’s post-Field Day era began with *Dancing at Lughnasa*, which premiered at the Abbey Theatre in 1990, under the direction of Patrick Mason. *Dancing at Lughnasa* is Friel’s most autobiographical play, a fact which seems to support the idea that Friel’s departure from Field Day allowed him to write solely for himself. The play was Friel’s greatest success.

Although Friel was already well-known internationally at this point, *Dancing at Lughnasa* solidified him as a permanent fixture on the world theatre stage. Patrick Mason’s Abbey Theatre production transferred to the West End in London, where it won a Laurence Olivier Award, and then to Broadway, where it won the Tony Award and the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award in 1992. In 1998, a film version of the play starring Meryl Streep premiered in Glenties. After the success of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Friel continued to work and write on his own terms from the comfort of his home.

Friel was famously private, especially after his departure from Field Day. He rarely granted interviews, so he earned an unfair reputation as being somewhat reclusive. Friel’s published diary excerpts reveal that he spent his days writing and planning new projects, editing work, often as a result of notes suggested by his wife, Anne, who was

²⁷ Laurence Finnegan, “In Interview with Laurence Finnegan (1986),” in *Brian Friel: Essays, Diaries, and Interviews*, ed. Christopher Murray (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1999), 124.

always his first reader. Friel continued to produce new works until 2008. He maintained his commitment to attend rehearsals, watching over his new plays, most of which premiered at The Gate Theatre in Dublin. In 1997, Friel directed the premiere of *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* at the Abbey Theatre. The production received lukewarm reviews. Surprisingly, the critics' primary complaints concerned the script, not the direction of the production. The play deals with a writer who is struggling with his legacy. Even critics reviewing later productions found parallels between the writer in the play and Friel himself, questioning whether he was experiencing similar struggles.²⁸ If Friel was struggling with his legacy, he was soon affirmed.

In 1999, The Friel Festival was held in Dublin to commemorate the playwright's seventieth birthday. The citywide festival included productions or readings of ten of his plays and coincided with the release of a special Friel issue of *The Irish University Review*. Friel was also elected as a *Saoi* ("wise one") by the members of the prestigious Irish arts group, Aosdána, in 1999. As Friel approached his seventies, his writing slowed and shifted to primarily one-act plays, particularly adaptations of Chekhov's works. His last full length original play was *The Home Place* (2005). During the same year *The Home Place* premiered, Friel suffered a stroke. He was left disabled, but was well enough to celebrate his eightieth birthday with a second series of public events.

The 2009 celebration included the opening of the Brian Friel Centre for Theatre Research at Queens' University Belfast. In his obituary to Friel, Richard Pine noted that at the time, the playwright joked that it would be "in the basement of the Seamus Heaney

²⁸ Karen Fricker, "Review: Give Me Your Answer, Do!" *Variety*, April 26, 1999, <http://variety.com/1999/legit/reviews/give-me-your-answer-do-4-1200457165/>.

Center for Poetry.”²⁹ Both The Gate and The Abbey theatres participated in the celebration. The Gate produced three of Friel’s plays, while The Abbey produced “A Birthday Celebration for Brian Friel,” which included staged readings of Friel’s plays and readings by Thomas Kilroy and Seamus Heaney. Finally, *Irish Theatre International* published a Friel issue. Friel did not make public appearances after his eightieth birthday celebration. He passed away following a long illness on October 2, 2015.

Friel’s impact was perhaps best described by director Joe Dowling, who explained that Friel’s work provides “revelation within revelation,” and asserted that to his knowledge, there was not another “playwright in the English language who will go out on a limb as often as [Friel] does.” Dowling insists that Friel “is the one who has most consistently ... reflected the changes in Ireland.”³⁰ This boldness has been a large part of what ensured Friel’s success abroad. In discussing Friel’s impact in the United States, critic Terry Teachout suggests that his work will continuously resonate because of the clarity and universality of his characters: “Whether you come from County Donegal or southeast Missouri, you grew up with them. They’re as real as family—and as capable of hurting one another, more often than not with the best of intentions.”³¹ Although Friel is admittedly not a household name outside of theatre circles in the United States, Teachout “cannot imagine that his American semi-obscurity will last, for his vision of human nature was too penetrating and profound to be long overlooked.”³² Indeed, for Friel’s

²⁹ Pine, “Brian Friel Obituary.”

³⁰ Joe Dowling, qtd. in Gussow, “From Ballybeg to Broadway,” 204.

³¹ Terry Teachout, “Remembering Brian Friel (1929-2015): A Poet of the Particular,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 2, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/remembering-brian-friel-1929-2015-a-poet-of-the-particular-1443812843>.

³² Ibid.

extensive body of work to fade into obscurity would be a loss for the theatre and the audience it serves.

Overview of Friel's Work

Friel published three short story collections, wrote a total of twenty-three full-length original plays and several adaptations, primarily after the works of Chekhov and Turgenev (see Appendix A). In addition to the accolades mentioned above, Friel has been a recipient of the Evening Standard Award (*Aristocrats*), New York Drama Critics Circle Award (*Aristocrats*, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, *Molly Sweeney*), Laurence Olivier Award (*Dancing at Lughnasa*), and a Tony Award (*Dancing at Lughnasa*). He was inducted into the American Theatre Hall of Fame in 2006, became the Donegal Person of the Year in 2010, and was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the British Royal Society of Literature, and the Irish Academy of Letters. Friel's penchant for capturing the deeply personal yet universal concerns of his characters within the context of scenes of everyday life, along with his many translations of the Russian realist's plays earned him the moniker, "the Irish Chekhov." All of these accolades were mere anecdotes for Friel himself, a sentiment which suggests not only humility but also affirms authenticity in a man whose chief aim was to be fully himself in whatever place or capacity he was situated in the world. This purpose can be seen throughout his body of work, from what he allowed to influence him, to the recurrent themes in his plays, to his particular writing style.

Influences

In his 1972 essay, “Plays Peasant and Unpeasant,” Friel asserted that the Irish theatre was only seventy-three years old, was founded by William Butler Yeats, and that “if we take as our definition of Irish drama plays written in Irish or English on Irish subjects performed by Irishmen, we must scrap all those men who wrote within the English tradition, for the English stage, and for the English people.”³³ According to Friel, the highest priority for the Irish dramatist must be to create Irish work. This did not necessitate writing in the Irish language, but it did necessitate using the English language in a distinctively Irish manner. In multiple interviews, Friel has invoked J. M. Synge as the only Irish writer to successfully develop a “language appropriate to theatre in this country.”³⁴ Anthony Roche points out that Synge and Friel share a “determination to devise [such a language] through the degree and kind of theatrical self-consciousness they bring to bear on the subject-matter and situations of their plays.”³⁵ Synge’s influence on Friel’s work extends beyond language into content.

In his 1988 study of Friel’s work, Ulf Dantanus begins by discussing Synge and Seán O’Casey as writers who “have defined to the outside world essential aspects of Irishness.”³⁶ These “aspects of Irishness” are highly localized, reflecting heterogeneity from west to east, with Synge’s plays speaking to the rural western lifestyle and

³³ Brian Friel, “Plays Peasant and Unpeasant (1972),” in *Brian Friel: Essays, Diaries, and Interviews*, ed. Christopher Murray (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1999), 51.

³⁴ Richard Pine, *Brian Friel and Ireland’s Drama* (London: Routledge, 1990), 166. Also see Paddy Agnew, “In Interview with Paddy Agnew (1980),” in *Brian Friel: Essays, Diaries, and Interviews*, ed. Christopher Murray (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1999), 85.

³⁵ Roche, “Friel and Synge,” 147.

³⁶ Ulf Dantanus, *Brian Friel: A Study* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1988), 1.

O'Casey's reflecting the urban east. Dantanus explains that the plays of these playwrights "contain within them [a] dichotomy of place, coupled with an insistence on place as the acting influence on the shaping of character and event."³⁷ Beginning with the success of *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, Friel joined the ranks of Synge and O'Casey, both extending and augmenting the definitive Irishness suggested in the works of his predecessors. Like Synge and O'Casey, Friel is known chiefly as an Irish playwright, whose focus is on Irish concerns; however, his interest tended to lie in the locales on the seemingly forgotten physical and ideological borders between the east, west, north, and south, whose inhabitants experience influences from all sides. Friel's writing is heavily influenced by the political unrest of Ireland and its toll on the Irish people.

Friel acknowledged and lamented the seemingly closed doors to cultural exchange between east, west, north and south, explaining that there is "an intensely urban society in Dublin, the cultural and political vanguard of everything that's thought and done; and you have the rest of the country in isolation. The result is that instead of the rural and urban societies complementing one another and acting as a mutual balance, you have two distinct societies, one literally wilting away and the other forging ahead without this very necessary balance."³⁸ He was a self-identified nationalist, committed to the view that the island should be one nation, considering the north/south border as arbitrary and created by politics. Friel emphasized this in an interview with Desmond Rushe: "The border has never been relevant to me. It has been an irritation, but I've never intellectually or

³⁷ Ibid., 2.

³⁸ Friel qtd. in Rushe "In Interview with Desmond Rushe," 27.

emotionally accepted it.”³⁹ For Friel, cultural or topographical difference only served to highlight the diverse experiences of Irish identity.

In addition to influences from Irish writers and Irish history and politics, Friel was heavily influenced by his own family life and personal experiences. Long before he wrote *Dancing at Lughnasa*, he affirmed his belief in the formative nature of childhood experiences in an interview with Graham Morison: “Nothing important ever happens to you after you’re ten or so.”⁴⁰

Brian Friel spent many of his childhood summers in the rural town of Glenties, County Donegal in the Irish Republic with his mother’s family, the McLoones. All six of Mrs. Friel’s sisters were unmarried and without children, so they doted on young Brian and filled his summer days with fishing and picnics and listening to music on the radio. These summer months in Glenties left a significant impact on young Friel. Even in his adulthood, Friel revealed to fellow Irish writer Thomas Kilroy that two of his “maiden aunts” had “ended up like” the homeless people the two writers saw camped out for the night along the Thames in London.⁴¹ As the story goes, Friel confided to Kilroy that the women “had suddenly left the family home in the tiny village of Glenties in Ireland, and never returned.”⁴² Friel told Kilroy “the story of himself as a young man setting off to London to search for the two aunts.”⁴³ Ultimately, the aunts died “destitute and

³⁹ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁰ Brian Friel, qtd. in Graham Morison, “In Interview with Graham Morison (1965),” in *Brian Friel: Essays, Diaries, and Interviews*, ed. Christopher Murray (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1999), 7.

⁴¹ Gussow, “From Ballybeg to Broadway,” 203.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Thomas Kilroy, “Friendship,” *Irish University Review* 29:1 (1999): 88.

abandoned in London.”⁴⁴ Kilroy himself “made the obvious, if cold, remark that he [Friel] would simply have to write a play about them.”⁴⁵ Friel would eventually take Kilroy’s advice. Friel’s memories of his aunts and Glenties had taken up permanent residence in his mind, becoming something more than memory and transcendent of history.

Regarding a particularly clear, but not possibly factual memory of walking with his father from a fishing trip in Glenties, Friel remarked “for some reason, the mind has shuffled the pieces of verifiable truth and composed a truth of its own. For to me, it is a truth. And because I acknowledge its peculiar veracity, it becomes a layer in my subsoil; it becomes part of me; ultimately it becomes me.”⁴⁶ For Friel, then, the impression of experience is indelible, whether or not it is factual.

The indelible impressions of the writing of Synge and O’Casey, the complicated history of Ireland, and his own personal history can be seen throughout Friel’s body of work. Together, these influences have contributed to the formation of the world’s foremost Irish writer. If these influences taught Friel how to be an Irish writer, then he taught the world what it means to be Irish.

Themes

Friel’s body of work focuses on concerns and complexities of Irish culture. There are three interconnected themes which recur in Friel’s stories and plays. These themes are

⁴⁴ Gussow, “From Ballybeg to Broadway,” 203.

⁴⁵ Kilroy, “Friendship,” 88.

⁴⁶ Friel, “Self Portrait,” 39.

place, community (including family), and religion. As with the works of his predecessors, place is the most visible and significant theme in Friel's work.

Most of Friel's plays are set in the fictional town of Ballybeg, Ireland. Ballybeg is an English version of the Irish phrase, *Baile Beag*, meaning "small town." This fictional rural town, generally located in northwest Ireland, is often isolated from the outside world. Ballybeg's primary inspiration is his mother's home village of Glenties, County Donegal. In addition to a common setting, Friel's plays consistently feature ubiquitous issues which permeate Irish cultures. Dantanus clarifies, "in its social, economic, and religious characteristics, in its implied political history, the village of Ballybeg is emblematic of Ireland and a part of Ireland rather than any one specific village in that area. In this respect, Ballybeg represents an effort, on Friel's part, at the wider application of a place, towards some kind of local universality."⁴⁷ Friel himself has said "the canvas can be as small as you wish, but the more accurately you write and the more truthful you are the more validity your play will have for the world."⁴⁸ The specificity with which Friel writes about Ireland's multifaceted cultural concerns provides for universality, therefore rendering his work universally appealing and relatable. Richard Pine notes that Friel's "ability to connect the smallest place with 'the whole world,' to reveal its essentially universal truths ... distinguishes [his] drama and makes it so affective, as well as effective, for his audiences."⁴⁹ As evidence of this universality, it is significant that the theme of place permeates even Friel's most internationally successful plays. For example,

⁴⁷ Ulf Dantanus, *Brian Friel*, 26.

⁴⁸ Brian Friel, qtd. in Des Hickey and Gus Smith, *A Paler Shade of Green* (London: Frewin, 1972), 223.

⁴⁹ Richard Pine, *The Diviner: The Art of Brian Friel* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1999), 11.

in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, Gar expects to enjoy a better life free from the stress of his strained relationship with his father and the shame of his failed courtship of Kate Doogan. Complicating – and driving – Gar’s departure is the tumultuous social and political climate in Ballybeg. He will likely never attain the wealth to be truly financially secure, and is looking forward to getting a second chance in Philadelphia. However, Gar faces the very real possibility that his self-imposed exile to America will only place him in the same hopeless situation in another location. This question of the fate of the Irish diaspora is a recurring place-based theme in Friel’s work. Emigration is generally depicted as an uncertain solution to problems characters face in their communities.

While closely connected to place, Friel’s focus on community points to his fascination with relationships between people, especially among families. Friel’s work is chiefly concerned with the personal consequences of the localized issues in Ireland. Even in isolated rural areas, like Ballybeg, people do not live in a vacuum; they are defined by their relationships and circumstances, whether they like it or not. From Friel’s earliest stories, community is a constantly revisited theme. His plays depict people, not unlike Friel himself, who live in flux between their private and public lives, constantly redefining their relationships. Dr. Richard Russell elaborates on the ever-changing nature of Friel’s communities: “Friel’s dramas highlight real and imagined moments of history not only to portray the intense change rural communities often experience at such times but also to show how such metamorphosis is nearly constant in these communities.”⁵⁰ Further, Dr. Russell explains that “flux is a major condition explored”⁵¹ in Friel’s early

⁵⁰ Richard Rankin Russell, *Modernity, Community, and Place in Brian Friel’s Drama* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 10.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

plays. Depicting this ever-changing quality of communities was a goal Friel described in his 1967 essay, "The Theatre of Hope and Despair." Friel suggested that the arts are similar to communities in their constant state of dynamic flux: "they are what they are at any given time and in any given place because of the condition and climate of thought that prevails at that time and in that place."⁵² Friel's use of community as a major theme is evident across his body of work.

In *The Doubtful Paradise* (1960), a man struggles to accept unfortunate circumstances in his professional life and the dissatisfaction of his family. *The Gentle Island* (1971) depicts a community wherein members are punished for deviating from what is considered normal, appropriate behavior. In *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* (1997), a writer is faced with an opportunity which will completely transform his life and the life of his family. Friel's most intentional exploration of community are found in two of the three original plays written for Field Day: *Translations* (1980) and *The Communication Cord* (1982).

Field Day's first production was Friel's *Translations*, produced in 1980 at the Guildhall theatre in Derry. The play's central issue is language, which is used to explore the clash between English and Irish culture in the framework of the nineteenth-century founding of the Irish Ordnance Survey. Toward the end of the play, a character attempts to recite a passage of *The Aeneid*, providing a metaphor for the manner in which Ireland has been taken over by England. Field Day scholar Pilný summarizes that "Ireland is thus presented as a place destroyed by colonial power similar to the Roman Empire."⁵³ This

⁵² Brian Friel, "The Theatre of Hope and Despair," in *Brian Friel: Essays, Diaries, and Interviews*, ed. Christopher Murray (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1999), 16.

⁵³ Pilný, "Narrative and Communication," 40.

was an early example of a postcolonial reading of Ireland's past. Friel continued his work on the theme of reimagined Irish cultural history in his second original play for Field Day, *The Communication Cord*, which premiered in 1982. *The Communication Cord* is a contemporary farce which uses a seaside cottage as a metaphor for Irish culture. Over the course of the play, the cottage is destroyed.

Friel's third and final major theme is that of religion, or spirituality. His relationship to organized religion might be compared to his relationship with theatre directors: there is a long tradition of its usefulness, but it might well be something that people can do without. Organized religion came to Ireland as a result of colonization. In both Irelands, the Celtic traditions have always been remembered, though not necessarily observed with reverence. Friel himself has noted in jest that perhaps he abandoned the priesthood because "it would somehow be in conflict with [his] belief in paganism."⁵⁴ Friel's experiences of being trained for the priesthood and his subsequent conflicted religious feelings have been depicted in multiple plays, often taking the form of a character in a position of leadership, especially as a schoolteacher (Kate in *Dancing at Lughnasa*,) or religious leader (Father Jack in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Frank in *Faith Healer*). These characters often face some crisis of belief or complete re-evaluation of their own spirituality. Friel's treatment of religion and spirituality in his work is inclusive in nature; his exploration of these themes ultimately results in affirmation that each person must make their "own distinctive spiritual search,"⁵⁵ as Kate says in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. In Friel's dramas, this distinctive search often ends in acceptance of circumstances and theologies contrary to characters' expectations.

⁵⁴ Friel qtd. in Gussow, "In Interview with Mel Gussow," 143.

⁵⁵ Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, 72.

In *Wonderful Tennessee* (1993), for example, a group of friends intend to go on a journey to a storied pagan island, but their boatman never arrives, causing the characters to panic before coming to “acknowledgement of the grace in this life which remains [the] best substitute for transcendence.”⁵⁶ In *Faith Healer*, Frank Hardy accepts his inability to heal the cripple and the resulting outrage of the crowds who will likely kill him. Friel’s treatment of religion and spirituality suggest that grace and acceptance, not dogma and ritual, are the way to enlightenment. This theme, together with the themes of place and community, serve as a cohesive backdrop against which Friel told stories in his own distinctive style.

Writing Style

Brian Friel’s writing is often identified by its expert use of language. In the words of Terry Teachout, “His plays are at once deceptively naturalistic and intensely poetic, and the poetry is drawn from the commonplace particularity of everyday speech.”⁵⁷ Friel’s commitment to distinguishing an Irish way of using the English language yielded a masterful way with words that renders the work accessible to virtually any audience. This accessibility was enhanced by Friel’s commitment to truthful, effective storytelling over adherence to standard conventions of playwriting.

Friel routinely rejected traditional standards of playwriting (such as adherence to Freytag’s plot structure) in favor of the form and structure that best served the story he was telling at the time. Scholar Hyungseob Lee explains that Friel “has relentlessly pushed at the borders of conventional stage realism, searching for dramatic structures that

⁵⁶ Matt Wolf, “Review: Wonderful Tennessee,” *Variety*, July 19, 1993, <http://variety.com/1993/legit/reviews/wonderful-tennessee-1200432707/>.

⁵⁷ Teachout, “Remembering Brian Friel.”

will embrace psychological and spiritual intensities, which traditionally don't find expression within that mode of representation."⁵⁸ Friel's commitment to conveying the essence of the story, without regard for generally accepted form, is apparent in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*. In the play, protagonist Gareth O'Donnell is portrayed by two actors as "Public Gar" and "Private Gar." This doubling of the character allows audiences to explore Gar's conflicted feelings about his imminent departure from Ballybeg. While Public Gar is non-confrontational and timid, Private Gar is judgmental and explosive, even toward Public Gar. The preeminence of story is evident in *Faith Healer*, with the entire play being told in four monologues, all depicting the same events from three different perspectives. Further, as a storyteller, Friel tends to use monologue more frequently and more effectively than most of his contemporaries. A survey of Friel's works reveals that many, if not all, of his characters are storytellers in their own right. Indeed, one of the distinguishing characteristics of Friel dramas is a Chekhovian tendency for the internal action to take center stage via dialogue and monologue.

Friel's bold experimentation with dramatic form led him to explore a new genre with *Dancing at Lughnasa*, though not necessarily new territory. Friel had always written about memory, whether his subject was national memory as in *Making History*, individual memory as in *Faith Healer* and *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, or a combination of the two, as in *The Freedom of the City*, Friel's 1973 response to Bloody Sunday and the Widgery Tribunal in Northern Ireland. With *Dancing at Lughnasa*, however, Friel reflected on his own personal memory, and expanded it into not just a play where memory matters, but where remembrance is the play.

⁵⁸ Hyungseob Lee, "A Brechtian Scene in Modern Irish Drama: Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*," *The Yeats Journal of Korea* 42 (2013): 133.

Dancing at Lughnasa

Friel first wrote about the memories of his childhood summer holidays in the short story, “A Man’s World,” which is included in the collection, *Saucer of Larks* (1962), and depicts strained relationships when a family of three is forced to move in with the wife’s siblings. A second semi-autobiographical short story, “Aunt Maggie, the Strong One,” also found in *Saucer of Larks*, offers a character study of a woman (presumably based upon one of Friel’s aunts) who has come to the end of her life. These two short stories serve as the basis for the plot and characters for *Dancing at Lughnasa*.

The spirit in which *Dancing at Lughnasa* is written is consistent with Friel’s approach to other plays that involve history. The facts are facts not because they happened, but because they are embedded in the consciousness of the characters inhabiting the stage- and thus in the consciousness of Friel himself. The play’s genesis is rumored to have come out of a years-long period of writers’ block for Friel. Thomas Kilroy’s suggestion that Friel write about his exiled aunts provided the inspiration the playwright needed.⁵⁹ When Friel put pencil to paper, what resulted was a story of five sisters, each named for one of his seven aunts. Concerning this reduction from seven sisters to five, Friel has remarked that “economy is more important than truth.”⁶⁰ The play depicts their endurance through the tumult of “things changing too quickly.”⁶¹ These changes, consistent with Friel’s body of work, concern place, community, and the intersection of the sacred and the secular.

⁵⁹ Gussow, “From Ballybeg to Broadway,” 203.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 206.

⁶¹ Brian Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 1993), 10.

Friel's construction of place is significant in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. As in all of Friel's Ballybeg plays, the small town acts as a site of internal conflict and exile. In the case of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the fictional Ballybeg is based upon the real life Glenties, County Donegal, Ireland. Like other iterations of Ballybeg, this is a small town that might be defined by clashing values and cultures. Glenties, although a part of the Irish Republic, is located so far west of Dublin that it feels more like rural Northern Ireland. The majority of the population is Catholic; however, there is a strong contingency of people who are still avid protectors of the pagan Celtic traditions. Further, the village is isolated from the rest of the country, making cultural progress a challenge, even while technology becomes increasingly pervasive, bringing the outside world into Ballybeg chiefly through the radio. With the theme of place comes the issue of exile, so prevalent in Friel's work.

As noted earlier, it has been suggested that the exile of two of Friel's aunts was the motivating inspiration behind *Dancing at Lughnasa*. However, Agnes and Rose are not alone in their exile. Each character faces exile in his or her own way, whether self-imposed or forced by outside influences, whether physical or metaphorical. In this way, *Dancing at Lughnasa* can be seen as a culminating work, examining the theme of exile from multiple angles. In addition to place and exile, *Dancing at Lughnasa* extends Friel's work regarding community.

The community in *Dancing at Lughnasa* consists primarily of the Mundy family; however many of the basic conflicts within the family are exacerbated by the greater Ballybeg community. Each sister has her own motivation for holding the family together or embracing exile. Some of the sisters are interested in keeping the status quo

unchallenged, while others are weary and longing for a more hopeful outlook. Over the course of the play, the pressures on the family (as individuals and as a unit) cause it to unravel. The best the Mundys can do is to hold on to the moments they have together. With the benefit of hindsight through adult Michael's narration, the fleeting moments of familial unity take on a ritualistic quality, providing *Dancing at Lughnasa* with its final Frielian concern: spirituality.

Dancing at Lughnasa expresses "the viability of pagan remnants"⁶² of the cultures of both Ballybeg and the imaginary Ugandan village of Ryanga. *Dancing at Lughnasa* reimagines the titular shaman of *Faith Healer* as an earnest priest-turned-missionary-turned-disgraced-religious-free-spirit, Father Jack Mundy. While Frank's story ends in tragedy, Father Jack's story could be said to end in enlightenment, largely due to the community in which Friel placed Father Jack. Although all of Jack's sisters, and Kate especially, are under pressures to conform to Catholic standards, they all have moments of breaking from the strictures of their organized faith and following the longing of their spirit. Specifically, this moment occurs simultaneously for each of the women in the famous dance scene. Each character must reconcile their spiritual needs in conflict with their religious convictions. Friel has used *Dancing at Lughnasa* to fully engage in spirituality in all its forms, whether organized or indigenous, and to affirm that human spirituality is both sacred and pagan. Inasmuch as Friel has synthesized his consistent thematic concerns of place, community, and spirituality in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, he has also fully embraced his propensity for risk-taking in structure, delving into the developing genre of the memory play.

⁶² Russell, *Modernity, Community, and Place*, 196.

Part of what makes this play so intriguing is Friel's commitment to telling the story through the eyes of Michael, who is present throughout the play as a narrator, but who also speaks the lines of his younger self when recounting memories of his interactions with his family. Friel's convention of child Michael, who never appears onstage, being voiced by adult Michael, reinforces the audience's sense of being made privy to the specific memory of the person who lived these events. Friel's boldness in writing a memory play exploring his early life signaled a deeper reliance upon the power of his storytelling to sell his plays to the public. He no longer needed to capitalize on national mythologies to find resonance and favor with audiences. With this altered perspective, it is fitting that the first production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* was not presented at Field Day, but rather at the Abbey Theatre, under the direction of Patrick Mason.

Friel attended rehearsals, supervising Mason's interpretation of the text until its opening night on April 24, 1990. He first revisited the play after its opening at the National Theatre in London (in October 1990), when it played a one-time performance in Glenties as a part of a Friel festival in August 1991. Friel attended the performance of the play in the hall at Glenties Comprehensive School, just one-half mile from the McLoone family cottage. By this point, the production was already Friel's most successful work, and was scheduled to be produced on Broadway.

Patrick Mason's production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* ran, either as an Abbey theatre touring production, with a dedicated company on the West End, or with a dedicated company on Broadway, from April 1990 to May 1993. The show was revived

on the West End in 2008, and ran for a respectable three months. The revival was directed by Anna Mackmin, and was performed in the round, a first for the play.

The Abbey Theatre production was universally well-received among both critics and lay audiences. Friel and Mason successfully mounted what would become an icon of Irish theatre. Julie Kavanagh reports that upon its transfer to the National Theatre in London, *Dancing at Lughnasa* “became the most coveted ticket in town.”⁶³ For the Abbey remount in 1992, the scenic design was adjusted to reflect the bleak circumstances facing the Mundy family and more of the world that Father Jack has left behind. Designer Joe Vanek altered the backdrop, making it less warm than the original which had depicted cornfields scattered with poppies. Further, he incorporated images reminiscent of the African landscape. The cottage and surrounding garden was left sparse. It is significant to note that although this change did occur, the scene most remembered and the photographs most used in context of discussing the Abbey production are of the original set with the corn field encroaching on the cottage. This is also presumably the same set that was used on the Plymouth Theatre stage in the Broadway production, although at least one critic was unimpressed, citing the set as “the only weakness” in the production, and describing it as “a jaundice-yellow plaster backdrop with a lot of real wheat planted in front.”⁶⁴ In spite of this critic’s disappointment with the scenic design, however, the play fared very well in New York.

The Broadway production enjoyed critical and professional success, garnering eight Tony Award nominations, and winning in the categories of Best Play, Best

⁶³ Julie Kavanagh, “Friel at Last,” in *Brian Friel in Conversation*, ed. Paul Delaney (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 220.

⁶⁴ Richard Hornby, “Theatre: ‘Nick and Nora,’ ‘The Crucible,’ ‘Dancing at Lughnasa,’” *The Hudson Review* 45, no. 1 (Spring, 1992): 109.

Direction of a Play for Patrick Mason, and Best Featured Actress in a Play for Bríd Brennan for the role of Agnes. However, ticket sales were slow until the Tony Nominations were made public. Perhaps the reluctant attendance can be explained by the uncertainty of what American audiences could expect from an Irish play. Reviews of the Broadway production underscore the Irishness of the play, with one reviewer noting, “This beautiful Brian Friel drama will surely survive after the original Irish cast leaves, but it's hard to imagine just how.”⁶⁵ It seems clear that audiences were particularly cognizant of the ways in which the Mundy family’s struggles are not like American struggles. Place, then, becomes a driving force not just onstage, but offstage. Further, critic John Beaufort provides a clue to the way American audiences receive *Dancing at Lughnasa*, suggesting in his review of the Broadway production that “*Dancing at Lughnasa* keeps its main focus... on the minutiae of domestic life. The Mundy womenfolk natter and gossip, ask riddles, and tune in dance music on their lately acquired radio.”⁶⁶ In addition to the emphasis on domesticity as opposed to the political and industrial pressures manifest in the play, Beaufort also seems to de-spiritualize the central scene in the play: “The wireless also prompts one of the most rambunctious scenes; the whole household breaks into dance, filling the kitchen with boisterous movement.”⁶⁷ This view of the key scene seems at first glance to diminish meaning inherent in the play; however, when taken in context with Friel’s position that his work is

⁶⁵ M. Scot Skinner, “Theater Scene – Brian Friel’s ‘Dancing at Lughnasa’ Among New York’s Best Plays,” *The Arizona Daily Star*, December 26, 1991, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.baylor.edu/resources/doc/nb/news/0EACE56EF0A82E7C?p=AWNB>.

⁶⁶ John Beaufort, “‘Lughnasa’ Takes Critics by Storm,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 4, 1991, <http://ezproxy.baylor.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.baylor.edu/docview/405707942?accountid=7014>.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

subject to any possible interpretation, as well as Michael's insistence in the play that the significance of the dance was in its transcendence of language, perhaps Beaufort got it right. America is not a country so steeped in religious ritual as is Ireland, so it is perhaps natural that the religious conflicts that provide for a moment of sacred ritual on stage can be met as an equally sacred moment of ritual in a nonreligious American context.

Whatever their interpretation of the play, American audiences have been privy to productions of *Dancing at Lughnasa* at every level of performance since the play's publication.

The Off-Broadway Irish Repertory Theatre produced a twentieth anniversary production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* in 2011, directed by Charlotte Moore. This production was relatively short-lived, and *New York Times* critic David Rooney called the revival "unlikely to supplant memories of the Tony Award-winning 1991 production."⁶⁸ Rooney's assessment seems to be more about the indelibility of Mason's production than the quality of Moore's revival, which he described as "more about limpid novelistic storytelling than poetic atmosphere," assuring potential audiences that "Mr. Friel's immense gifts prevail" in this production during which Rooney promises "it's impossible not to be transported along with" the Mundy sisters. It can be said with certainty that *Dancing at Lughnasa* has, in some form or another, made a permanent impression on New York audiences. The question of whether Friel's work translates to non-theatre-hubs is best answered by Terry Teachout, whose specialty is reviewing regional American productions. His review of Florida Repertory Theatre's production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* suggests that not only is Friel's work just as accessible outside of New York,

⁶⁸ David Rooney, "Rosy Nostalgia and Sharp Reality Entwine in a Potent Jig," *The New York Times*, November 1, 2011, <https://mobile.nytimes.com/2011/11/02/theater/reviews/dancing-at-lughnasa-at-irish-repertory-theater-review.html>.

but that with the right company, it may be even better received. One of the major strengths of this production for Teachout was the strength of the ensemble, which he suggests felt very much like an authentic family, probably given the fact that the actors were part of a “near-permanent ensemble.” In a 2015 retrospective article for the *Wall Street Journal* following Friel’s death, Teachout suggested that even the speech patterns of Friel’s characters, while distinctly Irish, rang true to the speech of people that Americans know.⁶⁹ Further exploration of the efficacy of Friel’s work in the United States by Dr. Richard Russell suggests that because the country is so divided, with each region having its own distinctive cultural mores, there is more in common with the Irish struggles of community and nationality than one would expect. Dr. Russell asserts that *Dancing at Lughnasa* “may indirectly offer a lesson about national unification to the American nation” in that it “highlights a fragmenting culture.”⁷⁰ Further, Dr. Russell suggests that the growing population of working poor in the United States would recognize themselves in the Mundy family as they struggle to remain relevant in a world that is passing them by. *Dancing at Lughnasa*, and, on a larger scale, Friel’s work in general, resonates because of its clarity of storytelling and its specificity to experience. Though the details change, the longings are the same, and it is Friel’s storytelling that has enabled him to craft a body of work which will likely grow more popular in American theatre.

In planning a production of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, a thorough analysis of the text is necessary to reveal the key elements of the story and ascertain how and why the story

⁶⁹ Teachout, “Remembering Brian Friel.”

⁷⁰ Richard Rankin Russell, “Deprovincializing Brian Friel’s Drama in America, 2009 and 2014: *Dancing at Lughnasa* in Fort Myers, Florida, and *Faith Healer* in Houston, Texas,” *Irish University Review* 45:1 (2015): 106.

works. The following chapter will provide such an analysis, beginning with the genre and moving into an exploration of the action, characters, symbols, themes, and overall mood and tone of the play.

CHAPTER TWO

Analysis of *Dancing at Lughnasa*

Genre

Dancing at Lughnasa is a memory play. The opening and closing moments of the play act as bookends and feature a snapshot of the Mundy family as narrator, Michael, chooses to remember them: basking in the heat of the Lughnasa sun, enjoying their last moments together before the troubles of life cause them to grow apart. It is widely accepted that Michael is a stand-in for the playwright, and so the memories depicted in the play can be reliably attributed to Friel himself, who makes clear that memory “owes nothing to fact.”¹ Brian Friel embraced the genre of memory play in writing *Dancing at Lughnasa*.

In his book, *Memory in Play*, theorist Attilio Favorini explains that the memory play was a natural outgrowth of the modern era. With the emergence of psychology as a legitimate field of research during the late nineteenth century came a vested interest in memory. Favorini notes that in the same way the sciences of psychology, evolution, and anthropology are considered, so “the sciences of memory are [also] a feature of modernism.”² Modernist thought is consumed with a search for understanding of the mind through scientific examination, so it is natural that memory would figure prominently into such experimentation. Favorini notes “whether the seeker of the source of consciousness is a philosopher, a psychologist, or a playwright, the modernist path

¹ Brian Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 1993), 83.

² Attilio Favorini, *Memory in Play: From Aeschylus to Sam Shepard* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 88.

toward understanding self and subjectivity goes through the forest of the memory.”³ For Favorini, then, “theatre of the modern era is theatre of memory.”⁴ Favorini argues that while memory has been a key feature of drama for centuries, the actual study of memory in dramatic literature is not without difficulty: “universality and diversity of memory make it challenging to anatomize the field of memory studies or discover how it is ordered across disciplines.”⁵ Favorini’s solution was to identify several themes “which playwrights share with memographers [those who study memory] in other intellectual domains.”⁶ The first of these three themes is memory and the self.

According to Favorini, memory contributes to the construction of self. Although there are differing theories as to exactly how memory works to shape the self, it is agreed that narratives (the recollection and telling of story) contribute to this identity construction. This justifies the pervasive use of memory in the theatre, which is a storytelling art form. Favorini is careful to point out that the reliability of memory recall to “recover a real occurrence is endlessly debated.”⁷ Friel’s position is that factual reality is irrelevant. As discussed in Chapter One, Friel used the example of his memory of a fishing trip with his father to explain that the very existence of a memory, regardless of its factual credibility, renders it true for the individual recalling it. Favorini would likely support this conclusion, given his extensive exploration on the memory/history binary and cautionary remark that “we need to be careful... not to overdichotomize either the

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 87.

⁵ Ibid., 90.

⁶ Ibid., 91.

⁷ Ibid.

fact/fiction or the memory/history binaries.”⁸ Thus a study of *Dancing at Lughnasa* as memory play is not an investigation into the truth of the autobiographical nature of the play, but an investigation of the experiences of the narrator who is recalling the events of the story. For Friel, this meant recreating his own memories and imagined conversations between his family members in the context of a fictional story. *Dancing at Lughnasa* is Michael’s fictional memory play infused with parts of Friel’s reimagined personal history.

Favorini’s second theme is memory and the world. Memory is constructed as a result of an individual’s life experiences specific to the manner in which they move through the world. Therefore the memory of the same event will be different among multiple individuals because they will all encounter that event from different perspectives: as a person of a certain gender, ethnic background, age, or social class. Favorini notes further that “even individual memory is socialized and group-driven.”⁹ Therefore, it can be concluded that memory is subjective to the place and community in which an individual experiences an event. In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, place and community are key themes in the storytelling, as in all of Friel’s works. Michael’s memory of the summer of 1936 is shaped specifically by his upbringing as the only child of an unwed mother and four doting aunts in the financially depressed and socially restrictive village of Ballybeg, Ireland. All of these details are formative for Michael and for the other characters in the play. The strictures of the Catholic community have placed the Mundy sisters under judgment by those who see Michael’s existence as a child born out of wedlock as disgraceful. Furthermore, Father Jack’s return is an additional source of

⁸ Ibid., 62.

⁹ Ibid., 91.

shame for the Mundy sisters, as he has rejected the Catholic Church and embraced the customs of the Ryangans whom he went to Uganda to convert. The poor economic conditions in Ballybeg combined with limited options for women mean that the Mundys will always struggle to keep food on the table. The community in which the Mundys live defines them.

Favorini's third shared theme among playwrights and memographers is memory and the mind. Just as memory shapes the self, memory also has the capacity to shape the mind. Favorini asserts that "memory remakes the brain."¹⁰ In both psychoanalytical and theatrical contexts, changing modes of thought and processing of information can come as a result of remembered experiences. In an analysis of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, it is reasonable, then, to draw conclusions about Michael's decision-making as a result of his remembered experiences of his upbringing. He chooses to search for his aunts in his adult life. He resolves not to tell his mother about his father's second family in Wales. These choices can be viewed as a direct result of his memories of his aunts' dependence on their sisters for sustenance and Gerry's consistently inconsistent presence in his mother's life, paired with his memory of Chris's complete happiness when she was with Gerry. Applying Favorini's ideas about memory to *Dancing at Lughnasa*, it is clear that Michael's memories form not just the plot of the story, but provide a way to analyze Michael's identity, place in the world, and reasoning.

In categorizing plays that deal with memory as their own unique genre of theatre and as separate from plays that simply include traces of or themes common to memory study, Favorini defines a memory play as

¹⁰ Ibid., 92.

one in which the intention to remember and/or forget comes prominently to the fore, with or without the aid of a remembering narrator; in which the phenomenon of memory is a distinct and central area of the drama's attention; in which memory is presented as a way of knowing the past different from, though not necessarily opposed to, history; or in which memory or forgetting serves as a crucial factor in self-formation and/or deconstruction.¹¹

Favorini's comprehensive definition is useful in determining whether a play is simply concerned with themes relating to memory, or if it belongs in the memory play genre.

Dancing at Lughnasa certainly uses memory as a major theme. A closer look at the play's content and structure in comparison with Favorini's definition can confirm that it is indeed a memory play. First, Michael's opening lines, "When I cast my eyes back to that summer of 1936, different kinds of memories present themselves to me,"¹² clearly state Michael's intention to remember over the course of the play. Further, this is a clear indication that Michael's memory will be the focus of the play itself with Michael acting as narrator. His monologues throughout the play provide contextual information for the events depicted onstage, and inform the audience of events which will take place in the future. Michael's task of remembering and reporting is not solely rooted in a desire to share historical information, but to sort through his memories of "a widening breach between what seemed to be and what was."¹³ His memory, then, shares a kind of co-authorship with the reality of his family history, so that not only is what truly happened of significance, but there is also great significance in the way Michael experienced the events of the play. Finally, Michael's memory is the means by which the audience

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Friel, *Dancing*, 9.

¹³ Ibid., 10.

experiences the dramatic action of the play, which depicts the unraveling of the Mundy family.

The Play

Given Circumstances

Dancing at Lughnasa takes place during August and September of 1936 in the Mundy sisters' home two miles outside the village of Ballybeg, Ireland. Ballybeg is a fictional small town located in County Donegal in northwest Ireland, not far from the Northern Ireland border. The Mundy family does not own a car, so they travel to the village by foot or bicycle. One significant event in the play takes place offstage in Lough Anna, which is just over an hour long walk from Ballybeg. The action of the play takes place in the Mundy family's kitchen and the garden surrounding their home.

The five unmarried Mundy sisters grew up in this home and take pride in it. The cottage is well-kept despite its age. The main part of the home is the kitchen, equipped with a turf-burning stove and new Marconi wireless radio. The sisters, four of whom do not work outside the home, spend the majority of their time in this room. These close quarters do not prevent the women from being lonely; each sister lacks true companionship. Agnes and Rose knit gloves and sell them to provide clothing for themselves. Maggie serves as housekeeper. Michael's mother, Chris, assists with the glove-making and upkeep of the home. Kate is the primary breadwinner, and works as a teacher in the local parish school. Kate's devout Catholicism is a driving force in the order of the home, while the Ballybeg community actively participates in both Catholic and pagan traditions.

The play takes place during Lughnasa, the ancient Celtic harvest festival. This festival is a celebration of the successful grain harvest and a confirmation of a plentiful upcoming winter. Although Ballybeg is a Catholic community, Lughnasa is widely celebrated with bonfires, animal sacrifices, and a community dance. The parishioners do not see a conflict between their organized religion and their pagan traditions. They are fully Catholic and fully Celtic. Just as they celebrate the Celtic god Lugh for providing an abundant harvest, they also celebrate their “leper priest,” Father Jack, who has been serving as a missionary to a leper colony in Uganda for twenty-five years prior to the start of the play.

Father Jack’s high esteem in Ballybeg has garnered respect and admiration for his sisters, especially Kate, who is the most devout of the Mundy sisters. His missionary appointment in Uganda has come to an end, however, and it is clear from the start of the play that he is not the same man he was when he left Ballybeg. In addition to returning with malaria, Jack has not received a warm welcome from the Church. Kate’s conversations with the parish priest have led her to believe that Father Jack and, by extension, Kate and their other sisters, has lost the high status he once held in the parish due to choices he has made in how he ran his ministry in Uganda. Father Jack is not the only family member to have made questionable choices in the eyes of the strict Catholic community.

Chris Mundy is the unwed mother of seven year old Michael Evans. Having a child out of wedlock is a social taboo in Ballybeg. Chris has not seen Michael’s father, Gerry Evans, in thirteen months. Prior to that meeting, her interactions with Gerry have been sporadic, as he maintains his permanent residence in Wales. Chris took his last

departure particularly hard. She became depressed and hysterical for weeks on end. Gerry has been attempting to make a living as a traveling salesman. His work has taken him across Ireland, and he has recently caught a ride to Ballybeg. Gerry is not welcome in the Mundy home because of the way he has treated Chris.

All of the Mundy sisters have complicated romantic histories. Maggie, Kate, Rose, and Agnes each have experience with lost, unrequited, or otherwise unattainable love. As a teenager, Maggie developed a crush on a young man by the name of Brian McGuinness, who was interested in her friend, Bernie O'Donnell. Maggie, Bernie, Brian, and Tim Carlin all participated in a dance competition in which Bernie and Brian came in second place as a couple. This was the last time Maggie saw Brian, who left Ballybeg for Australia shortly thereafter. Later, Bernie migrated to London. Kate frequently goes shopping at Morgan's Arcade; the proprietor, Austin Morgan, has long been the object of Kate's affection, but he has never returned her feelings. Rose has been meeting with Danny Bradley, with whom she has fallen in love. However, Danny is married and therefore an inappropriate suitor for Rose. His wife abandoned him and their three children and left for England six months prior to the action of the play. Finally, Agnes has had some unspecified intimacy with Gerry Evans during one of his trips to Ballybeg. Agnes has not shared this information with any of her sisters, and it has been at least thirteen months since she and Gerry have seen one another.

The play is narrated by adult Michael, who is remembering the last summer he spent with his family all together in Ballybeg. He was seven years old that summer, and the three major events he recalls are the purchase of a wireless radio, his uncle Jack's return to the family home, and the arrival of his father, Gerry Evans.

Dramatic Action

As the play begins, Maggie, Agnes, Rose, and Chris attend to daily household tasks while awaiting Kate's return from town with groceries. Rose confesses her feelings for Danny Bradley, a married man. Kate arrives home from town and reports how excited the whole community is for the harvest dance. For a brief moment, the sisters make plans to attend, but Kate soon insists that the mature Mundy women must not embarrass themselves by dancing.

Father Jack enters, confused about his surroundings. His health issues are concerning to his sisters, who remember him as dignified. Eager to discuss something more positive, Kate reports that she has run into Maggie's old friend, Bernie O'Donnell, who has returned to Ballybeg from London for the first time in twenty years. Bernie represents what life might have been like for the two eldest Mundy sisters, had they chosen to emigrate rather than stay home and care for the family. After Maggie reminisces about Bernie O'Donnell, Christina turns on the radio.

Taken by the music, the sisters momentarily abandon their need for orderliness and their inhibitions and they dance. The dance is eventually "made grotesque,"¹⁴ signifying that the women have reached their psychological and spiritual breaking points. This is not a celebration of liberty, but an explosive release of frustration. Even Kate, who thrives on order and control, joins the dance. Just as suddenly as the dancing begins, though, the radio gives out, the music stops, and the sisters, one by one, stop dancing. They are brought back to reality by the broken Marconi.

After the frenzy of the dance, the frustration of the inconsistent radio serves as a catalyst for the sisters in expressing their frustrations. They attack one another for any

¹⁴ Ibid., 31.

and every reason: for their language, their parenting, and their management of money. The argument comes to a halt when Maggie announces Chris's former lover and Michael's father, Gerry Evans, approaching.

Gerry attempts to impress Chris with his plan to purchase a bike for Michael, reports of omens of things to come, and finally his recent decision to join the International Brigade. Gerry has come to tell Chris that he plans to go to war. The radio spontaneously begins playing, and Chris indulges in a dance with Gerry. Agnes reacts strongly to Kate's open disdain for Gerry and runs out of the house. Alone with Maggie, Kate confides that she has a feeling things are falling apart and that she is powerless to change it.

Jack discusses his life in Ryanga, explaining the importance of the ancestral spirits, ritual sacrifice, and the universal acceptance of what he calls "love children" in Ryanga. Kate advises Jack that it's time to take a walk. As they prepare for their walk, adult Michael steps in and reveals to the audience that Kate was right about the unraveling of the family: she will lose her teaching job the next year, and Agnes and Rose will leave the home – never to return – in early September.

Act two takes place three weeks after the events of act one. Agnes and Rose are out picking bilberries, and Chris is with Gerry, who has returned once more to Ballybeg. Kate insists that Jack, who has recovered from his bout of malaria, lead mass on Monday. Jack describes Ryangan ritual ceremonies, noting that people there do not make a distinction between the religious and the secular, assuring Kate and Maggie that they are not unlike the people of Ballybeg.

When Agnes arrives home, the sisters discover that Rose has gone missing. As the sisters bicker over what to do, Rose arrives at the cottage. She refuses to provide more than scant details of her rendezvous with Danny Bradley, asserting herself as an adult for the first time in the play. Adult Michael once again interrupts the action to describe the grim future of the Mundy family, and then returns the audience's attention to the action of the play.

As Father Jack and Maggie discuss the polygamous lifestyle of the Ryangans, the radio spontaneously begins playing "Anything Goes," a song about the increasing moral ambiguity of progressing times. Gerry and Agnes dance together, echoing an earlier scene with Gerry and Chris. Chris sees Gerry kiss Agnes and turns off the radio, perceiving more than an innocent friendship in Gerry's intentions. After having a change of heart, Chris tries to turn the radio back on, but it does not work. The moment has passed.

As Maggie, Kate, and Agnes set up a picnic dinner, Rose comes into the garden holding her recently killed white rooster. Father Jack and Gerry perform an impromptu hat-trading ceremony. The scene is reminiscent of the Ryangan ceremonies Father Jack describes earlier in the play. After the ceremony, the family spends a moment basking in the heat of the sun. In his final comments to the audience, Michael explains the significance of the memories he has of this time: that it is not the facts that matter, but the feeling the memory itself invokes to create a truth transcendent of fact.

Characters

Michael

In his 1994 dissertation, Norman E. Schroder devised a method of analysis specifically for memory plays, with special focus on the narrator. Schroder's definition of the memory play is slightly more narrow than Favorini's; for Schroder, memory plays are "plays in which a first person focalizing narrator [or FPFN] recounts events from his or her own past, which are reenacted as staged scenes. The FPFN participates in these embedded scenes as his or her younger self."¹⁵ Schroder elaborates, "the narrator need not be the central character of the drama, but must exercise complete control over the telling of the story."¹⁶ In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Michael is a first person focalizing narrator, so using Schroder's analysis method is helpful in understanding how Michael functions in the play.

Examination of Michael's relationship to the story he is telling reveals information about his attitude and purpose in storytelling. Of first importance is the fact that *Dancing at Lughnasa* is somewhat autobiographical in nature, thus the fabula (the events of the story being told by the FPFN) is considered personal/autobiographical. By definition, this means that Michael will function as an implied author, enhancing the already present likelihood of the audience "to accept as factual [his] versions of the events of the story."¹⁷ It is of particular significance in *Dancing at Lughnasa* that the script stipulates that young Michael will never appear; his lines will be spoken by adult

¹⁵ Norman E. Schroder, "Memory Plays: Historical and Narrative Analysis of Mediacy in First Person Focalized Drama" (PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, 1994), 4.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 231.

Michael. Schroder points out that this choice serves to “remind the audience that they are, in essence, viewing the play through his eyes.”¹⁸ With the relationship of the FPFN to the story determined, the next step is to investigate the FPFN’s attitude toward the events of the story.

The romantic tone of much of Michael’s narration suggests a sense of acceptance of his reimagined past. Investigation of what Schroder calls the primary fabula (the circumstances surrounding the act of real-time narration to the audience)¹⁹ reveals that Michael is occupied only with telling his version of the story of the summer of 1936 to his audience. This makes Michael a reflective FPFN, as he is not acting to change his past during the course of the play, only to report his memories. The next step in Schroder’s analysis of FPFNs is the control the narrator has over the traits of each character.

Michael provides some information about his parents and aunts, but it is limited to a few words or phrases. In contrast, he spends a comparatively great deal of time describing Father Jack. The audience is given an account of his work in Africa, his brief stint in the British military, his high social status, and the disparity between young Michael’s mental image of Father Jack and the appearance of Father Jack in person. This unbalanced traiting suggests that Father Jack carries special significance which may not be in balance with his stage time in the play, so that Michael must fill in information so that the audience can fully appreciate the character’s presence and impact on the story.

Michael tells the story in mostly chronological order, with two instances where he reveals information about events that will take place after the end of the following scene. The first instance is in act one, where Michael explains that Gerry will return, and that

¹⁸ Ibid., 247.

¹⁹ Ibid., 17.

Kate is generally correct in her premonition that Jack will never be the same and her suspicion that she will lose her job because of his fall from grace within the church. The second instance is toward the end of act two, when Michael stops the action to explain what will happen to each of the characters in the next thirty years. The effect of this, as described by Schroder, is that “Friel has removed any semblance of dramatic suspense,”²⁰ so that the audience is able to watch the concluding moments of each act with the hindsight that adult Michael has. This hindsight makes the mundane moments experienced by the characters onstage remarkable to the audience, or, in Schroder’s words, this is an example of “the commonplace made poetic”²¹ by Friel’s storytelling. Ultimately, these breaches in continuity serve to heighten the tension of the scenes which immediately follow. The audience is made aware of the particular significance of these moments as singular, never to occur again. The final relevant consideration in Schroder’s analysis of FPFNs is narrative reliability.

Having already established that as an implied author of autobiographical fabula Michael’s recall of events is assumed to be credible, it is important to make a distinction between knowledge of events and omniscience. Precisely because his story is autobiographical, Michael is unable to integrate the thoughts and feelings of his parents, aunts, and Father Jack into the story. He can only guess at their motivations. This means that “the omniscience of the audience is limited to the omniscience of the FPFN.”²² Even with the hindsight which Friel uses so effectively to craft scenes of poetic significance, there is still no way for Michael, or for the audience, to be sure of anything that does not

²⁰ Ibid., 248.

²¹ Ibid., 249.

²² Ibid., 269.

actually happen and/or is not actually stated. For example, no one will ever know the extent of Agnes's history with Gerry, nor will anyone ever know exactly what happened between Rose and Danny Bradley. These questions are left unanswered and unanswerable.

Schroder refers to scenes which depict events in which the FPFN was not present as "keyhole scenes," and explains that these scenes are either reconstructed by the FPFN or they were witnessed in secret by the FPFN. In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the latter is often the case. The moments when Michael is known to be absent, yet are depicted onstage are explained by adult Michael's confession that he watched these events unfold in secret. Schroder notes that in these cases, young Michael's "unseen presence will be felt—even as his older self remains on stage."²³ One final consideration is relevant in terms of Michael's reliability as FPFN, and that is his final monologue, in which he references a memory that "owes nothing to fact."²⁴ Michael's apparent confession of unreliability here seems not to discredit the story, so much as to reframe it as of greater poetic significance than narrative significance. The story becomes important not because of what happened to Michael's family, but because of its lasting impact on him. The memory, as Favorini suggests, has constructed Michael's identity.

Chris

Chris is the emotional center of the play. As Michael's mother, she is the most prominent figure in Michael's memory, and the play can be read as Michael's tribute to her. Chris's emotional journey as protagonist takes her from believing that the family unit

²³ Ibid., 271.

²⁴ Friel, *Dancing*, 83.

is to be preserved at the cost of her happiness in a relationship with Gerry, to understanding that no matter how hard she tries, the family is not destined to stay together. She may as well enjoy the fleeting moments she has with the people she loves.

As the youngest of the Mundy sisters, and an unwed mother, Chris has likely not had many romantic interests other than Gerry. Because of the Catholic strictures that most of Ballybeg lives by, Chris would likely also have become a social outcast, undesirable to most suitable potential partners. Further, Chris simply would not have had the time to pursue them, as she is busy raising her son and helping to maintain the household. Her position has necessitated that she prioritize her family above her personal desires. Gerry's intermittent visits to Ballybeg have never left Chris convinced that he would be a reliable partner and father, but have left her wounded. When Gerry appears in Ballybeg, Chris is initially paralyzed because she knows that he poses a danger to her family's way of life. She knows that she is magnetically attracted to him, but she also knows that nothing good can come from becoming involved with him again. When Gerry proposes to her, she has no choice but to decline.

In spite of her refusal to accept his proposal of marriage, Chris longs to make a life with Gerry and their son, Michael. Her refusal of his proposal is not rooted in disinterest, but in her traumatic memory of his prior visits. Chris explains, "you'd walk out on me again. You wouldn't intend to but that's what would happen because that's your nature and you can't help yourself."²⁵ The memory of Gerry's abandonment is fresh in Kate's mind as well, who describes how Chris "collapsed" into a depression, "sobbing

²⁵ Ibid., 43-4.

and lamenting in the middle of the night.”²⁶ For Chris, the risk of Gerry leaving her again is not worth committing to him, but that does not stop her from indulging in a spontaneous dance.

Chris’s choice to allow herself one dance with Gerry becomes the first step in her journey to pursuing her happiness apart from her family’s needs. She is ultimately rewarded for taking this risk, as Michael tells the audience at the end of act one, Gerry “did come back in a couple of weeks as he said he would.”²⁷ Gerry’s return challenged the reliability of Chris’s memory of his abandonment, making it possible for her to make yet another choice for her own personal happiness. Michael explains that “although [Chris and Gerry] didn’t go through a conventional form of marriage, once more they danced together, witnessed by the unseen sisters.”²⁸ Chris’s choice to commit to Gerry does not imply a choice to abandon her family, but a reframing of what it looks like for her to keep the family together.

When Chris is not with Gerry, her function in most scenes is to promote harmony among her siblings. She assists with household duties, such as ironing and cooking. She frequently acts as a buffer between her sisters when tensions arise. Finally, she is chiefly concerned that none of her sisters are burdened by Michael. This concern manifests itself in frequent protestations that he is being spoiled by his aunts and concerns that he is not treating them well. While this may at first be seen as antagonistic behavior, it is simply her way of expressing that she does not want her son to become a dividing force among the family. Chris’s commitment to keeping the family together evolves as her

²⁶ Ibid., 45-6.

²⁷ Ibid., 52.

²⁸ Ibid.

commitment to Gerry grows stronger. Rather than envisioning a solid family unit composed of six siblings and her son, Chris takes it upon herself to integrate Gerry into the family.

This attempt at integration begins when Chris comes in from her first dance with Gerry. If Gerry is to become a partner and father, then it is logical to Chris that she is to become matriarch of the household. She attempts to assert herself in this role by repeatedly requesting to make the tea, which has typically been Agnes's job. This is the first indication that Agnes will prove problematic for Chris's plan to make Gerry a permanent part of the family. During Gerry's second visit to Ballybeg, it becomes apparent that there is unspoken tension between Agnes and Gerry.

When she watches Gerry kiss Agnes, Chris's commitment to keeping the family together wavers significantly. This is a turning point for Chris, who realizes that it may not be possible for all of the sisters to live in harmony as their desires may be in direct conflict with one another. For a moment, Chris prioritizes her own happiness over familial harmony, and attempts to hurt Agnes by hinting that Agnes's income from selling gloves is in jeopardy: “(to AGNES, icily) Vera McLaughlin's calling here tomorrow. She wants to talk to you and Rose.”²⁹ However, Chris's desire to hurt Agnes is outweighed by her desire to keep the peace, and she quickly gives up her attack: “(relenting) ... she probably won't call at all.”³⁰ This desire to keep the peace should not be mistaken as consistent with Chris's earlier desire for harmony. With Gerry as an object of interest for both Chris and Agnes, and Chris committed to Gerry, it is clear that Chris is choosing to quietly sacrifice her open relationship with Agnes. The sisters will

²⁹ Ibid., 78.

³⁰ Ibid.

not openly fight, but they will not live together in harmony for much longer either. As the play drives to a close, Chris sacrifices her steady relationship with her sisters for her dream of security with Gerry. As far as she is concerned, this is enough.

Michael reveals that the final moments of the play depict the final moments of the Mundy family. Soon, Agnes and Rose will leave, as will Gerry. Chris is not wounded by this departure, as she was by his earlier abandonment. Michael explains that “when [Gerry] went off to fight with the International Brigade, [Chris] grieved as any bride would grieve. But this time there was no sobbing, no lamenting, no collapse into a depression.”³¹ Relying instead on her happy memories of the couple’s dances together to carry her through her loneliness, Chris endures Gerry’s absence with grace, content to have gotten the love she craved, even at the cost of distancing herself from her siblings.

Kate

Michael remembers Kate as the only wage earner, eldest sister, and most devout Catholic in the family. As such, Kate feels a great responsibility to keep the family in good moral and social standing. This desire is at odds with her instinctive knowledge from the beginning of the play that the Mundy family has suffered a permanent fall from grace.

Kate takes it upon herself to act as the moral conscience of the family. When the Mundy women fantasize about how much fun it would be to attend the harvest dance, it does not take long for Kate to remind her sisters of their responsibilities and the recklessness of this plan. She chides her sisters, asserting that dancing is “for young

³¹ Ibid., 53.

people with no duties and no responsibilities.”³² Kate moves on to question whether her sisters “want the whole countryside to be laughing at us? – women of our years? – mature women, *dancing*?”³³ The eldest Mundy sister further invokes the religious implications of participating in the Lughnasa festivities, reminding her sisters that “this is Father Jack’s home.”³⁴ The Mundy sisters’ dream of one last dance at the Lughnasa festival dies with Kate’s frank reminder of the family’s responsibilities and the implications dancing would have for the family reputation. Kate’s fierce protection of the family name is driven by her memory of Father Jack.

Of the five sisters, it is clear that Kate had the closest and most adoring relationship with Father Jack. She keeps a photograph of him in her prayer book and invokes his name and his legacy on multiple occasions. It is no surprise, then, that Kate seems most bothered by Father Jack’s altered state of mind when he arrives in Ballybeg. Prior to his return, she had high hopes for the return of Father Jack to the church pulpit, so that things would go back to the way she remembered them. When he arrives as a mere shadow of the man she remembers, Kate determines to do all she can to restore him to his former glory. She takes complete charge of his healthcare:

The doctor says if you don’t take exercise your legs will seize up on you; so I’m going to walk you down to the main road and up again three times and then you’ll get your tea and then you’ll read the paper from front to back and then you’ll take your medicine and then you’ll go to bed. And we’ll do the same thing tomorrow and the day after and the day after that until we have you back to what you were.³⁵

³²Ibid., 22.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 64.

As Father Jack regains his strength, Kate urges him to reclaim his position as priest, asking “So you’ll soon begin saying Mass again?”³⁶ Father Jack’s general agreement to doing some type of gathering “next Monday”³⁷ is enough to keep Kate optimistic that her priest brother will be saying Mass again soon, but only for a little while.

It quickly becomes very clear to Kate that her earlier premonition³⁸ that things were not going to go as she had planned is coming true. Father Jack as she knew him will not be returning. She confides to her sister, “He’s changed, Maggie... Completely changed. He’s not our Jack at all. And it’s what he’s changed into that frightens me.”³⁹ Ultimately, Kate is correct when she resigns herself to the fact that her hope for Father Jack’s rise from the ashes of illness and disgrace will not be fulfilled. She loses her job as a teacher upon Father Jack’s return, and Michael confirms that her removal “had more to do with Father Jack than with falling numbers.”⁴⁰ By the end of the play, Kate is still acting as the moral center of the family, but she has accepted that the Father Jack of her memory has become a new Father Jack, a man on “his own distinctive spiritual search”⁴¹

Maggie

Michael recalls that the second eldest Mundy sister, Maggie, is the optimist and jokester of the family. However, this optimism is a thin veil over Maggie’s longing for love. Early in act one, she reminisces about an old flame, Brian McGuinness, who was her

³⁶ Ibid., 72.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 45.

³⁹ Ibid., 60.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 52.

⁴¹ Ibid., 72.

friend Bernie's partner in a dance competition. Maggie and Brian never had a romantic relationship, but she recalls details of this dance competition in a sort of reverent detail, noting that "they were just so beautiful together, so stylish; you couldn't take your eyes off of them. People just stopped dancing and gazed at them."⁴² Maggie has romanticized this memory of Bernie and Brian as the ideal couple. Maggie does not often display vulnerability, preferring to play games, smoke cigarettes, and make self-deprecating jokes; but through this façade, one can see her very real desire to love and be loved.

In the opening scene of act two, in a light moment, Maggie sings the following song lyrics to Michael:

Beside your caravan
The campfire's bright...
I'll be your vagabond
Just for tonight.⁴³

Following the song, Maggie asks Michael, "Your frank opinion, cub: am I vagabond material?"⁴⁴ On the surface, this interaction is lighthearted, but it is indicative of Maggie's desire to be loved. This question, taken with Maggie's reminiscence about Bernie and Brian, suggests that Maggie does not see herself as lovable in the first place; she expects that she will always long for but never attain the companionship that she desires.

This resignation is made even more apparent later in the play, when Maggie states that if she had to choose between a cigarette and an old fat man, "I'd take fatso, wouldn't

⁴² Ibid., 29.

⁴³ Ibid, 55.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

I? God, I really am getting desperate.”⁴⁵ Maggie’s hope of being loved and lovable motivates her to make her family laugh, to cook and clean for them as a wife and mother would, and to continue holding out hope that someone will come along who loves her, even if she will never be Bernie and her hoped-for suitor will never be Brian.

Agnes

Michael depicts Agnes as a “special protector”⁴⁶ to Rose, with whom she spends the majority of her time. Agnes is the most maternally nurturing of the sisters, and often proposes ideas just for the joy of doing them. Early in the play, Agnes muses, “wouldn’t it be a good one if we all went? ... To the harvest dance ... Just like we used to. All dressed up.”⁴⁷ Agnes seeks to recapture the joy that all of the sisters experienced at the harvest dance when they were young. The sisters first dismiss Agnes’s proposal as unrealistic, exemplified by Kate’s questioning (“you’re not serious?”⁴⁸) and subsequent conclusion that “There’s more than Ballybeg off its head.”⁴⁹ However, Agnes only has to confirm a few times that she’s “game,”⁵⁰ before the sisters begin imagining their night out dancing, planning outfits and determining how they will pay for their night on the town. Finally Agnes announces, “It’s settled. We’re going – the Mundy girls – all five of

⁴⁵ Ibid., 74.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

us together.”⁵¹ Unfortunately, the sisters never go to the dance, making this instance the first in a line of failed attempts by Agnes to bring joy into the house.

During the famous dance scene, the radio gives out, bringing the dance to an abrupt halt. As the sisters begin taking their frustrations out on one another, Agnes suggests throwing Marconi out and buying a new one. Her intention is not to flaunt her finances, but Kate takes immediate offense to her offer, suggesting that Agnes and Rose are not contributing enough to the household if she is able to afford such a luxury purchase. While this backfired attempt to bring joy caused a tense moment, it is insignificant compared to the trauma of losing track of Rose’s whereabouts as a result of trying to care for her.

When Agnes and Rose go out to pick bilberries, Rose reports that she is not feeling well, and Agnes sends her home to lie down. Agnes’s intention to take care of the work while allowing Rose much needed rest once again backfires, as Rose has not been honest with Agnes. Instead of going home, Rose has gone to meet Danny Bradley. When Agnes arrives at home to find Rose missing, she is devastated and feels personally responsible. In trying to nurture Rose, she has neglected her, and will feel responsible for whatever negative impact this has on the family. Rose’s return of course brings relief to all of the sisters, but Agnes cannot help but continue to feel the weight of responsibility of letting Rose get in harm’s way. When Gerry reaches out to lighten her mood, Agnes is hardly able to help herself.

Agnes has had a clear soft spot for Gerry throughout the play, but her sense of nurturing extends to Chris, and she is not willing to encourage the advances of a man she knows her sister loves. When Agnes finds herself wounded after multiple failed attempts

⁵¹ Ibid., 24.

to nurture and bring joy to her sisters, she sees dancing with Gerry as a tangible, literal way to recapture the joy of her memory of the harvest dance for herself. Since she cannot share this with her sisters, she chooses to share it with the only person who seems interested in her. This choice does irreparable damage to Agnes's relationship with Chris. The loss of profit from glove sales and unlikelihood of the factory to hire Agnes and Rose provide a perfect scapegoat for Agnes's decision to leave Ballybeg and start over with Rose. In her own way, this self-imposed exile was Agnes's final attempt at giving her sister back some joy: in removing herself from Ballybeg, she removed herself from competition for Gerry's affections. Sadly, it seems that for Agnes, her choices never come to fruition in the way she plans, and, worse, her beloved Rose seems to suffer with her.

Rose

Michael makes it clear that even as a young child, he could perceive that Rose longed to be taken seriously as a mature woman. Because she is "simple,"⁵² Rose is especially protected by all of her sisters. They love and want the best for her, but their concern for her manifests in treating her like a child. The result of this treatment is that Rose is constantly waiting and hoping to be treated with respect. In response to this desire, Rose often feels the need to assert herself to her sisters. This pattern is established early when the sisters discuss the events leading to a boy being burned. Rose offers information as to how he got burned, but is repeatedly corrected by her sisters, who tell her "you don't know the first thing," and ask her "Who filled your head with that

⁵² Ibid., 8.

nonsense?”⁵³ Finally, Rose must state “(*quietly, resolutely*) that’s what happened. I’m telling you.”⁵⁴ For Rose, it seems inevitable that her sisters will always treat her like a child.

Rose finds a ray of hope in a man who is not able to truly give her all that she needs or wants, but who has given her a small sense of significance by giving her a nickname. She recalls to Agnes that “he calls me his rosebud.”⁵⁵ Danny Bradley makes Rose feel that he sees her as his equal, not as a child. The tension between Rose’s insistence that she be respected as an adult and her sisters’ need to protect her comes to a head when Rose chooses to pursue an affair with Danny in direct defiance of her sisters’ advice.

While out picking berries with Agnes, Rose claims she is ill and needs to go home, but rather than going home, she meets Danny. Rose never reveals what exactly happened during their clandestine meeting, but Michael makes it clear that Danny has likely taken advantage of Rose and that Rose cannot see even after the fact that he has mistreated her. When her deception is discovered, in order to escape being punished like a child, Rose firmly tells her sisters that the information she has chosen to disclose is “all I’m going to tell you. That’s all any of you are going to hear.”⁵⁶ Rose’s treatment like a child causes her to make reckless decisions, ultimately destroying her self-worth, symbolized by her dead pet rooster that she despondently holds in her hands at the end of the play.

⁵³ Ibid., 26.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 71.

Father Jack

Father Jack is a local celebrity in Ballybeg, revered for being the “leper priest”⁵⁷ in Africa. The local newspaper, the *Donegal Enquirer*, occasionally ran articles about Father Jack, which would bring the Mundy family higher status in the local parish.⁵⁸ In his opening narration, Michael describes his mental image of Father Jack before his return from Africa as “resplendent.”⁵⁹ Michael reveals that he had once “seen a photograph of him radiant and splendid in his officer’s uniform”⁶⁰ which supported his mental image of his uncle as a hero. Father Jack’s long awaited return to Ballybeg came with certain expectations.

It was assumed that the celebrated leper priest would want to get back to holding mass right away upon his arrival in Ballybeg. In discussing Father Jack, Michael reveals that “if he was a hero to me, then he was a hero and a saint to my mother and to my aunts.”⁶¹ Father Jack is viewed first and foremost as a Catholic hero to those who knew him before his missionary journey. No one, especially Kate, anticipated that Jack’s time in Ryanga would change his views on spirituality. In actuality, Father Jack’s return home was compulsory, because of his “going native,”⁶² or embracing the culture and religious customs of the people group to whom he was sent to minister. This change in Father Jack illustrates the synthesis of the pagan and the sacred. Father Jack, the figure of perfect

⁵⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 17.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 50.

Catholicism, has fully embraced the pagan traditions of Ryanga, and desires to participate in both traditions simultaneously:

KATE: You are going to start saying mass again?

JACK: We've agreed on next Monday, haven't we? Haven't we, Maggie?

MAGGIE: Yes.

JACK: At first light. The moment Rose's white cock crows. A harvest ceremony. You'll have to find a big gong somewhere, Kate.⁶³

This idea of merging spiritual customs is crucial in the play. It seems to suggest that the pagan and the sacred are equally important for a person to live a fulfilled life. It is significant that in act one, Father Jack is physically ill, and that Kate correlates his physical illness with a spiritual illness. She assumes that as the malaria heals, Father Jack will become more like her memory of the great leper priest. However, Kate is mistaken. Father Jack is spiritually well from the very beginning of the play. He is benevolent with Kate and the others, explaining the customs of Ryanga and helping his sisters to understand the correlation between the synthesis of the sacred and secular in Ryanga. For Father Jack, there is no conflict between the two. He lives at peace with himself and with his life because he is aware of his spirit always being in flux: he is fully Catholic and fully pagan. This flux is what connects him with Gerry, evidenced by their ceremonial trading of hats.

Gerry Evans

Michael recalls his father, Gerry, as a charismatic showman. Although he spent limited time observing them during Gerry's rare visits to Ballybeg, Michael romanticizes Chris and Gerry's relationship. Further, in the same way that Kate is reluctant to let go of the image of the great priest that Father Jack once was, Michael is reluctant to abandon

⁶³ Ibid., 60.

his image of Gerry as a loving father. He is so determined to hold on to this image that he conceals his discovery of Gerry's second family in order to protect his mother.

Gerry acts as an object of desire for Chris and Agnes and represents all of the failed loves, past and present, of the Mundy women. Gerry is ultimately an unreliable partner. Friel tells the audience very early on that Gerry is not going to be the husband he says he desires to be. In his first meeting with Chris, Gerry tells her that he has seen "a cow with a single horn coming straight out of the middle of its forehead,"⁶⁴ insisting that it is "a good omen."⁶⁵ This story, of course, is not to be trusted, just as Gerry is not to be trusted. Gerry attempts to use the cow story as evidence of his reliability. In a way, Friel has done exactly that: cow unicorns are as real as his ability to remain faithful to Chris and be present as a father for Michael. It is telling that in the same conversation, Gerry claims to see "a bad omen."⁶⁶ This omen turns out to be reliable: it is no surprise when Michael reports that Gerry had a second family in Wales the whole time. Gerry also has a special connection with Father Jack.

Gerry and Father Jack are depicted as somewhat kindred spirits: they are both drifters who thrive in communities outside of their own, they are both enthusiastic about everything they endeavor to do, and they both reject strict adherence to social norms. From his first scene in the play, Gerry seems excited about Father Jack's recent arrival from Africa, noting that it is "terrific"⁶⁷ that Father Jack is back, and that he is a "lucky

⁶⁴ Ibid., 40.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 37.

man”⁶⁸ to have arrived home safe. Later in that same scene, Gerry notes that it is “terrific”⁶⁹ that Father Jack is watching Chris and him from the window. In addition to Gerry’s clear affinity for Jack, it is of note that both men are taken to spontaneous singing and dancing, a commonality which is highlighted in their ceremonial exchange of hats. Finally, it seems clear that Gerry shares Jack’s openness to multiple perspectives and disregard for social strictures when he sings “Anything Goes,” a popular 1930s anthem for proudly disregarding strict social mores. Gerry and Jack’s singing and dancing is not like the sisters’ singing and dancing, which seem to come more out of necessity than enjoyment.

Symbols

Music and Dancing

The prominently featured music in *Dancing at Lughnasa* is symbolic of the inner lives of the characters depicted onstage. This is a common feature of the memory play, as Tennessee Williams famously mused, “in memory, everything seems to happen to music.”⁷⁰ Michael elaborates on this “dream music that is both heard and imagined... everybody seems to be floating on those sweet sounds, moving rhythmically, languorously... I think of it as dancing... as if language had surrendered to movement... as if language no longer existed because words were no longer necessary.”⁷¹

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 42.

⁷⁰ Tennessee Williams, “The Glass Menagerie,” in *The Wadsworth Anthology of Drama*, ed. W.B. Worthen (Stamford, CT: Thomson, 2004), 1041.

⁷¹ Friel, *Dancing*, 84.

The spirit of the Mundy sisters is symbolized by the anarchic and intermittent Marconi radio. The radio provides the women with the music that allows their escape, but it also quits working intermittently, and, as Kate reveals, their radio's battery needs replacing more often than anyone else's in Ballybeg. The five sisters are worn down, and they truly need the escape that Marconi provides; however, they are not always able to put their circumstances out of mind. The unreliability of the radio echoes the unreliability of life.

The big dance moment is a synthesis of the sisters' need to let go of their strict adherence to their religion, their frustrations with being unmarried, and their need to express themselves more fully than language can accommodate. Friel uses the dance as an opportunity for the women to embody their hidden, primal nature. In production, there is a risk of treating the dance as a celebratory moment of independence. This interpretation is antithetical to the text. The dance is the sisters' expression of their pent-up aggressions. It is an act of defiance, cut short by the failure of the radio, and resulting in shame. Just as the radio gives out abruptly during the dance, the women are never truly allowed to fully express themselves due to the restrictive world in which they live. They must eventually come back to the reality of their lives in Ballybeg and the inevitable deterioration of their family. In short, the dance is a fleeting moment in time that can only perpetuate in memory.

Harvest

It is not arbitrary that Friel chose to set *Dancing at Lughnasa* during a harvest festival. There are four fire festivals on the Celtic calendar. Friel's choice is significant given the symbolic nature of harvest. While it is celebrated as a promise of provision

through the upcoming winter, the harvest carries with it implications of coming death, and ritual celebrations require a sacrificial victim. The vitality of a plentiful harvest for survival would not be lost on anyone living in an agrarian community. Simply put, without a good harvest people cannot live through the winter. Further, as a part of the cycle of life, the plants must die so that they can be restored to new life the following spring. The harvest is a symbol of the inevitable dissolution of the Mundy family which will begin with the abrupt departure of Agnes and Rose from the household.

Themes

The major ideas at work in *Dancing at Lughnasa* can be categorized into three main themes: place, community, and spirituality. The theme of place will be discussed first. Like all of Friel's plays, *Dancing at Lughnasa* is distinctively Irish. The imaginary village of Ballybeg serves as not only a location for the events of the play but also as a boundary for the Mundy family. They are limited in their life choices because of where they are situated in the world, so much so that emigration comes up repeatedly as the way to a better life. This is seen with Bernie O'Donnell, Brian McGuinness, and Danny Bradley's estranged wife. Further, Father Jack's enlightenment seems to come as a direct result of his change of location from Ballybeg to Africa. Finally, self-imposed exile becomes the solution to Agnes's inability to find happiness in Ballybeg.

In addition to the place of Ballybeg, the property on which the play takes place, the cottage and surrounding garden, is a site of history for the Mundys. This is the family home, in which all of the siblings were raised. The history of this home speaks to the family legacy which Kate is trying so desperately to maintain. The cottage is also the

physical site of Michael's memories as he tells the story. The cottage itself becomes Michael's memory.

The second prevalent theme in *Dancing at Lughnasa* is that of community. Ballybeg is a socially active village, and everyone seems to know everyone else, including their histories. Father Jack is a prominent figure not just within the Mundy family but throughout the town of Ballybeg. His public image is so prominent that his change of heart as a result of his time in Africa has caused a large-scale fall from grace for the entire Mundy family, specifically affecting Kate's ability to work. Further, the members of this tight-knit community truly care for one another. When a boy is hurt in the Lughnasa fire, the town comes together to pray and provide for him and his family as he is nursed back to health. Lastly, the community of Ballybeg celebrates long-held traditions together. Although it is a Catholic community, the inhabitants of Ballybeg still celebrate the pagan festival of Lughnasa, coming together for a harvest dance which is an important community event. Within the larger community of the town, is the smaller community of the family.

The familial community is of particular significance in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. The family is at the center of all of the sisters' obligations, hopes, and desires. The central question addressed in the play is whether or not the Mundy family can withstand the changes facing them during the summer of 1936 without growing apart. *Dancing at Lughnasa* offers an examination of what holds a family together in addition to questioning whether a family can or should be held together indefinitely.

The third and final prevalent theme in *Dancing at Lughnasa* is that of spirituality. As devout Catholics, each of the sisters must weigh their choices with their compulsion

to be holy. Kate faces the most significant challenges in this area, both because she is the most devout and because she is a teacher in the parish school. Her very livelihood depends upon the devoutness of the Mundy family in their faith. Ultimately, Father Jack's departure from the ways of the Catholic Church causes Kate to lose her livelihood. The irony of this is that while Father Jack's break from the faith traps Kate in poverty, it provides him with freedom.

This freedom is evident in the way father Jack is able to fully embrace not just Catholic traditions but also pagan traditions of the people of Ryanga. Although Father Jack is not physically well when he returns home, it can be argued that he is in better spiritual and mental health than any of his sisters. His lack of understanding of the language can be viewed as a metaphor for his transformation from priest to pagan. In short, the spiritual language of Catholicism no longer makes sense to Father Jack in the same way that the English language at Ballybeg no longer makes sense: he has spent twenty-five years learning spoken language of Swahili and simultaneously adapting to the spiritual language of paganism.

The Lughnasa festival, or the harvest festival, is a clear example of pagan life in Ballybeg, which parallels the harvest celebration Father Jack speaks of in Ryanga. These dual festivals taking place virtually a world apart from one another suggest an innate spirituality that comes with humanity. It is this primal spirituality which is expressed by all the sisters in their ritualistic dance. The dance is not meant to be simply about athleticism or performance ability, but a spiritual act designed and performed to bring each woman closer to her spiritual identity.

Mood and Tone

The play's central question is, can adherence to social or religious strictures keep a family together, and should it? Friel's work often deals with the tension of community identification versus desired individuality. As an Irishman, Friel was accustomed to a culture of emigration: for many young Irish people of his generation, exile felt like freedom. In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Friel transformed the idea of exile to excommunication. For Father Jack, excommunication from the Catholic Church is freeing. However, for Kate, even the idea of separating from the Church is terrifying. Ultimately, through Michael, the play extends grace to both views. As Michael explains, each person must make their "own distinctive spiritual search."⁷² Further, in depicting Kate participating in the frenetic dance, the play suggests that even the most religiously devout people have pagan longings, and that this is natural. Finally, the play suggests that in spite of one's best intentions, nothing is permanent. Families fall apart. People leave. The play proposes that rather than resist change, people are better off savoring the fleeting moments of joy with their loved ones before these moments become memories. In production, *Dancing at Lughnasa* should set a tone of grace. Staging a memory play comes with the challenge of cultivating nostalgia without indulging in shallow sentimentality. The following chapter will explore the approach to and process of the production design of *Dancing at Lughnasa*.

⁷² Friel, *Dancing*, 72.

CHAPTER THREE

Design Process

The Director's Vision

When considering the visual aspects of the play, the director knew that textures and other sensory elements would be important elements of the design. The set would need to look and feel like the memory of one's childhood home. The space in the home would need to feel large, though perhaps not actually be so. The furniture in the set would only consist of the most frequently used items, not everything that was in the actual home. The set would be dressed with memorable details like photographs and other items connected to specific experiences. The garden area would feel expansive, with ample places to hide. The grass would have to have believable texture, as the memory of what it felt like to sit in the garden would be fresh in Michael's mind as he told the story. Finally, the set needed to include the sycamore tree.

The costumes needed to reflect the emotional tonality of the characters wearing them, and it was important for the director to dress Michael in a knit sweater. The costumes would need to have visible textures and the colors would need to be pleasing to the eye. Finally, it was important for the director that the look and feel of the opening tableau, the Irish dance, and the closing picnic scene carry an otherworldly quality, which was likely to be achieved through lighting. The music needed to seem a natural part of the world of the play, as if it grew out of Michael's memory. Even with some clear ideas about what the design should and should not be, the director was intentional in cultivating

an atmosphere of collaboration, hopeful that each designer would feel ownership of the production and contribute positively to the creative process. The realization of the director's vision for the play was ultimately made easy by the collaborative design team.

Designing Memory

The first meeting with designers took place before the fall semester began. Those designers who had returned to Waco (the lighting and sound designers and the faculty mentors for the costume and scenic designers) gathered in the design lab and the remaining designers video-conferenced via Skype. This initial meeting was held to discuss first impressions of and significant ideas in the text from the designers' perspective. It was important that the multiple design perspectives of the play be considered in crafting a unified concept. The director wanted to ensure that every designer had a voice in the project so that their considerable investment of time and energy would be justified. Further, it was of utmost importance for the director to establish from the very beginning a spirit of collaboration.

After hearing the designers' input, the director advised the team that she was interested in approaching the play as a memory play, and it was important for the environment of the play to reflect what it would have been like as experienced and remembered by seven-year-old Michael. Memories are not always accurate to life, but they are connected deeply to the senses. This meant that the design would focus on creating an environment true to seven-year-old Michael's sensory experience, not necessarily his actual experiences. The design team agreed that authentic textures would be important in the design and that some elements might be larger than life in order to show the point of view of a small child. For example, the footprint of the house in the set

design was large compared to the real-life cottage of the McLoone family in Glenties. After this initial meeting, designers were asked to prepare an historical/contextual research presentation prior to the next meeting, which would be dedicated to discussing the director's concept.

The concept meeting took place about two weeks later. The meeting included a review of the dramatic action of the play: the Mundy family grows apart in spite of Christina's best efforts to pull them together. A discussion of this dramatic action, together with the major themes of place, community, and spirituality, led the design team to establish a metaphor which would serve as an overall production concept: *Dancing at Lughnasa* is the unraveling of an old Irish sweater. The Mundy family is like the sweater—distinctively Irish, close-knit, and experiencing irreversible change. Like the sweater, the Mundy family is not meant to last forever. In the same way the knit of the sweater will unravel, the family's separation and ruin is inevitable over time. This concept highlights the significance of the Irish setting. It gives a sense of texture and warmth to the production. Finally, this concept suggests things falling away as an inevitable progression over time. The director provided the designers with research images to accompany the concept and a list of words that might be helpful in thinking about the various design areas in relation to the concept.

The concept meeting represented a turning point in the collaborative process between the director and designers. In both the initial designer meeting and the concept meeting, the director was highly focused on acknowledging the views and feelings of the designers. The director was careful to include each designer in the discussion of the concept. She asked if any of them had questions, checked to make certain that the

concept was useful to them in approaching their design work, and expressed her willingness to consider the designers' ideas, even if they conflicted with the concept. Although the intention of the director was to ensure that all voices were heard and that all individuals felt equally valued in the process, the director's actions suggested a lack of leadership and vision on her part. The director's excessive desire to please everyone during the design meetings led to confusion and uncertainty among the production team. A specific example of this confusion was the director's literal forfeiture of her seat at the head of the table. After the director's mentor made mention of this, the director altered her behavior in subsequent meetings with the production team. She made a point of sitting at the head of the table, ensured her language suggested confidence, and trusted the designers to speak up with concerns rather than checking in with them to ensure their comfort with her decisions. While first impressions cannot be altered, this change came early enough in the process to allow the production to move forward in a positive direction. Further, the director's altered leadership approach did not impede the collaboration among designers and director that was still valued and desired. The most highly visible design collaboration was that between the director and the scenic designer.

Scenic Design

Challenges

The student scenic designer had two significant challenges to address in her design. First, the Baylor production's performance space, the Mabee theatre, features a thrust configuration. With the audience on three sides of the performance space, any set pieces must have a low profile in order to maintain sight lines across the playing space.

Secondly, the play calls for a character to climb a tree. Both of these challenges were conducive to the director's aesthetic requests. First, the director was insistent that the designer refrain from creating a box set of a cottage with fully realized walls. Next, the director felt strongly that the set needed to include a climbable tree. The original production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* was in a proscenium configuration with the tree imagined to be offstage. In Baylor's production, it made little sense to send the actor offstage since the height and size of the Mabey could easily accommodate a climbable tree. In addition to these challenges, the scenic designer was further tasked with creating a set that would take into account and illustrate the production concept. The first step in the scenic design process was image research.

From Research to Design

Research began with photographs of the Irish landscapes and cottages in the County Donegal area, with special attention paid to Glenties. This research helped generate ideas of how the actual world of the play might be replicated onstage. The director found pictures of the McLoone family cottage, which helped in designing the kitchen portion of the set. Since the director did not want a box set with walls, but envisioned a fragmented kitchen, the scenic designer also researched images of architecture ruins in Ireland. She focused on smaller buildings that had deteriorated over time (or had naturally "unraveled"), rather than those that were torn down. Finally, the designer and director examined Irish paintings of the 1930s to get a sense of how the landscape was depicted by Irish artists who lived there.

Designing the outside space posed the greatest logistical challenge given the odd design of the Mabey theatre. The performance space is on a raised platform surrounded

by an asymmetrical moat with stairs along the perimeter (see Figure B.1). The designer used this challenge as an opportunity to replicate the hilly terrain of Ireland by filling in the stairs with sculpted foam and covering over much of the surface of the playing space with a textile that mimics the look and texture of grass. This design element contributed to the sensory experience the director sought to create. Next, the designer turned her attention to the tree.

The scenic designer's research included the work of Irish painter Paul Henry. The design team was inspired particularly by the 1917 painting, *The Fairy Thorn*, which depicts a large and ominous-looking tree in the foreground, surrounded by a dwarfed cottage, with hills and mountains in the distance (see Figure B.2). The painting seemed to reflect the grim future of the Mundy family, with the tree standing as a symbol of their tenuous stability; though it may be old and its roots may be deep, it is, in fact, a dead tree. Thus, *The Fairy Thorn* became the direct inspiration for the tree in the set.

The scenic design featured hills appearing upstage of the tree, and continuing into the distance. This look was created by a series of flats upstage of the playing space carved into the shape of rolling hills. This series of rolling hills suggested an expanse of space between the Mundy family and their nearest neighbors, highlighting the family's isolation from the rest of the village and indicating the tragedy of the family's eventual unraveling. Upstage, a white cyclorama was lit to enhance the tone of the play from moment to moment.

During her research, the director discovered photographs of the McLoone family cottage. Using these pictures as well as photographs of Irish ruins as inspiration, the designer created a hardwood floor, a full hearth with turf burning stove inside, and stone

walls that would be cut away at about eighteen to twenty-four inches high. Because texture was important, the designer chose to lay a hardwood floor in the space rather than paint a hardwood finish. The kitchen was furnished with a table, a long bench, three chairs, a window seat/deacon's bench, a countertop facing stage left, and a large storage cabinet for dishes and other items used in the show. Simple, sturdy wooden furniture was selected. A series of beams with fragments of thatched roofing suspended above the cottage and anchored to the chimney finished the look of the cottage. The climbable tree finished off the set design. Overall, the set design was pleasing and satisfactory to the production team and did not require any substantial initial alteration (see Figure B.3). There were significant changes, however, in the details of the design from the preliminary sketches to the execution of the set. The first change came during the process of reconciling entrance and exit needs with the preliminary design. Initially, the boundary of the house was upstage of the down left vomitorium; however, with this ground plan, exits from the kitchen to the bedrooms became problematic. The footprint of the cottage was ultimately redesigned to include the stage left vomitorium as a hallway leading to bedrooms. The next three changes occurred as a result of a meeting in the Mabey with the scenic designer and her faculty mentor.

Meeting in the performance space helped to clarify wants and needs, and to reconcile those with the realities of the Mabey. Initially, the hardwood floor was to be laid on the stage floor itself, but the designer realized that a slight elevation (approximately four inches) would help with sight lines for the Irish dance sequence and provide a unique aural quality when actors were walking in the house as opposed to walking in the garden. Next, the planned arch over the vomitorium, which was to suggest

a doorway, was removed. In addition to this archway being superfluous to the design, the height required to allow an actor to easily pass through beneath it created a significant sight line challenge with the raised floor. The final change made to the set involved adding a completely new design element.

The director had been frustrated that the metal safety railings along the perimeter of the playing space were incongruous with the design and were distracting from the experience of the play. The director and designer made the decision to mask the railings as fences similar to those found in photographs of the Irish countryside. Integrating the railings into the scenic design was helpful in maintaining a consistent look for the world of the play. Unfortunately, this new design element would never come to fruition. The last two design changes came about as the scenic designer was creating the three-dimensional model of the set and saw opportunities to improve the look and feel of the play.

As the scenic designer built the model of the set (see Figure B.4), she became concerned by the expansive overhead space of the Mabey. She suggested bringing the proscenium masking down several feet. This decision provided more space for the lighting designer to hang instruments and create compelling looks on the cyclorama. The change also affected the perception of the tree, making it appear taller than before. In addition to noticing an excess of unused space overhead, members of the design team took note that the model appeared to depict an unusually large kitchen cottage. Adding a rocking chair downstage of the dining table filled the space nicely and added a homey touch to the women's living quarters. The production team and director were enthusiastic about the scenic design throughout the planning stages. However, once the crew began

building the set, communication failures negatively impacted aspects of the production process, and, in some cases, the performance.

From Design to Execution

The design of the tree and the process of building it did not go as smoothly as might have been possible had the director paid more careful attention to the process of scenic construction. When the set model was first created, the designer planned to anchor the twelve-foot-tall tree to the stage right side of the proscenium arch, with some means of climbing it built on the upstage side of the trunk, leading to a platform that would be disguised as one of the highest branches. The director asked regularly in production meetings when the tree would be completed, and unfortunately the date of completion was continuously pushed back from after the Thanksgiving break to after the semester break. The tree was finally in place just before tech week. When the tree was installed, the director was surprised to see that the trunk of the tree was much more narrow than the sketches and set model indicated, and the technical director reported no knowledge of the scenic designer's idea of a disguised platform behind a high branch. Further, the planned placement of the antenna was odd, because it was not high enough to require climbing the tree at all to gain access to it, which is a requirement in the script. The director met with the technical director in the space on the day the tree was installed to discuss the problems and formulate a solution. The technical director and director agreed that the antenna could be placed much farther stage left than originally planned, so that the actor would reasonably have to climb to be able to reach it. Small metal pieces were added on various places on the upstage side of the tree for the actor to climb, much like one might climb a rock wall in a gym. The actor was not going to be able to climb very high on the

tree because of safety concerns. Fortunately, a workable solution was found because the director and technical director maintained open lines of communication and willingness to collaborate to find quick solutions. Unfortunately, however, the director's misunderstanding of how this significant element of the set was to be constructed and the late timing of actual installation of the tree ultimately affected the believability of the moment when the actor climbs the tree and the other characters express concern for his safety. In addition to the problems associated with the tree, there were problems stemming from a lack of clear communication regarding the hill upstage of the tree.

When the foundation for the hill was installed in the space, the director noticed that it looked a bit like a skating ramp. Having seen the successful Styrofoam treatment on the stairs leading to the moat, she refrained from giving critical feedback in production meetings, trusting that the scenic crew would ultimately make the hill look organic. When it became apparent that the profile of the hill was not going to change, the director began noting in the rehearsal report that the shape and slant of the hill needed to be corrected. When the director and technical director met in the space to discuss the tree, the director also asked about the hill. The scenic crew had been working on solutions to make the hill look more natural, but had not found a good solution at that time. The technical director inquired whether the director had been given ample access to the set model, explaining that the hill on the set matched the model, to his eye.

The director met once more with the scenic designer and technical director with the model, and noted that the hill on the model, while still not perfect, was much more natural looking than the hill on the set. The technical director agreed that the hill on the stage could look better and agreed to continue working on it. The shrubs in the set model

had not yet been installed, and the technical director and scenic designer were confident that adding them would contribute a great deal to making the hill look more realistic. Throughout the final weeks of rehearsal, the director repeatedly discussed the hill with the scenic designer and technical director, but it was never successfully corrected. Once again, the director could have avoided this circumstance altogether had she paid more attention to the details of the set construction from the very beginning, rather than wait until the problem manifested itself and could not be solved. A third concern with the set was revealed during a walkthrough of the space.

During the week before technical rehearsals began, the director was made aware that the plan to disguise the safety railings had not made it past the initial design stage. Weeks earlier, when the director saw that the railings were not in the set model, she asked the scenic designer for clarification. The scenic designer explained that the safety railings weren't a part of the model because they were technically not a part of the performance space, but that she was working on a plan to transform them into a fence. The director trusted that this issue would be addressed by the designer and technical director. However, during a walk-through of the space prior to technical rehearsals, the director asked about the rails being covered and the technical director explained that although he recalled a mention of integrating the safety railings into the scenic design, no plan had been presented to him. Further, he explained that to alter the railings in any way would require building maintenance approval, and there was no time to acquire that approval before the opening of the production. Immediately, the director recalled that the safety railings were not in the set model. Her suspicion that this may be a problem in the long term had been justified. The director should have been proactive and insisted that the

audience safety railings be added to the model and included in the ground plan. There was one final unfortunate revelation that resulted in a last-minute change of a prop.

During a final walkthrough of the completed kitchen portion of the set, the director noticed the hearth was placed approximately two feet stage left of where it had been placed by the scenic crew for rehearsals. This interfered with the placement of a turf box, which was to be placed stage left of the hearth. The technical director and director discussed the issue and agreed that the scenic crew would build a smaller turf box to fit in the smaller space next to the hearth.

In reflecting with the stage management team about why the hearth was in the wrong place during rehearsals, the director became aware that the stage management team never received a complete ground plan with measurements. They had approximated the placement of hearth, but never established the exact location. Therefore, when the hearth was placed on the set by the scenic crew, no one in rehearsals was aware of the incorrect placement. Although one contributing factor to this issue is an apparent failure in stage management training, this confusion could have been avoided had the director requested to see the ground plan and then asked that it be made complete and accurate with measurements. It is unfortunate that the director failed to play an active role in the details of the scenic build. The production team's willingness to discuss and collaborate to find solutions to problems, however, minimized the impact of these problems to the production overall.

By the time tech week arrived, the majority of the scenic problems had been solved, with the exception of the hill. Throughout technical rehearsals, the props designer and scenic designer worked together to dress the set. As technical rehearsals proceeded,

actors discovered a flaw in a shelf on the hutch that was continually causing props to fall from the shelf. After many unsuccessful attempts to work around the flaw in the shelf, the scenic designer permanently attached a cup to the shelf in the spot where things were falling. The director and scenic designer noted that sometimes the easiest solution is the best solution. Ultimately, the scenic design was a solid foundation upon which the other designers built to depict the unraveling of the Mundy family.

Costume, Makeup, and Hair Design

Research

The costume and makeup designers focused their research on not only people and textiles of Ireland, but also took inspiration from the history of the dust bowl era in America. The fashion of this era is similar to that of the 1930s in Ireland, and the women would have had a similar level of access to beauty products as the rural Irish women at the time of the play. Further, the American dustbowl was a congruent place of cultural deterioration.

In researching for Father Jack's costumes, the designer had the challenge of finding a historical source for the officer's uniform and the ceremonial tricorn hat he gives to Gerry. Research ultimately revealed that the uniform and hat described in the text did not exist. The costume designer took inspiration from photographs of the British Armed forces during the World War One era to create an original design. This is reasonable, as the play depicts the world seen through the eyes of a seven-year-old child, not the world as historically accurate. The costume designer's research for Father Jack also included traditional Ugandan tribal wear, to be taken into consideration for Father

Jack's act two costume. With her research complete, the costume designer set out to create preliminary designs, which were only slightly altered for performance.

Design and Execution

The costume designer created looks that were simple, functional, and beautiful for the women, in recognition that the Mundys are poor, but not unkempt. Kate is the only employed member of the family. As such, she wears slightly higher quality clothing, but with 1920s silhouettes, suggesting that she does not often buy herself new clothes. Kate's clothing had more straight silhouettes than her sisters' clothing, reflecting her need for orderliness in all aspects of her life. Kate wore a long, belted sweater with a loose cardigan and a straight skirt in act one (see Figure B.6). After the design was approved, the costume designer was inspired to give Kate a cardigan change between the opening tableau and Kate's entrance in act one. The opening tableau cardigan was white (as pictured) and the second cardigan was olive green. This change contributed to the heightened, other-worldly image the design team was striving to create for the opening tableau. Kate's costume for act two was again a straight skirt paired with a long, belted sweater. Kate's darker emotional state was reflected in the dark coloring of the sweater and skirt, and her increased need to control the family image was reflected in the higher neckline of the sweater (see Figure B.7).

Maggie, the second-eldest sister, is the free spirit of the family. Her personality was reflected in her more free-flowing silhouettes and her penchant for mixing dress and apron patterns. Maggie also wore a pair of well-worn lace-up boots. These boots helped to reflect Maggie's deep connection to her past life as a young woman of adventure. Further, the boots reflected the unraveling of the family by literally coming untied

throughout the play (see Figure B.8). Maggie's act two costume was less whimsical than her act one costume. She exchanged the bright patterned dress for a long, flowing dark skirt and a simple taupe sweater. Maggie kept her printed apron for the second act, and the skirt, while darker in tone, retained the free-flowing movement associated with Maggie. Her sweater was worn and disheveled, with holes in various places, illustrating the "hair cracks... appearing everywhere"¹ in the family's life about which Kate had confided in Maggie.

Agnes's clothing was slightly more feminine than Kate's no-nonsense look and slightly more structured than Maggie's flowing dress and mixed patterns. Agnes wore a print blouse and skirt beneath her floral apron during act one (see Figure B.9), and she replaced the blouse with a blue gansey (cable knit sweater) for act two (see Figure B.10). Agnes's costumes were simple, yet subtly evocative of her emotional tonality. In act one, Agnes is emotionally sensitive to the needs of her family, leaving her vulnerable to being hurt. The light fabrics of her apron and blouse were meant to reflect Agnes's extreme sensitivity. In act two, Agnes donned a protective sweater, figuratively adding a layer of protection against the forces that would ultimately drive her to leave Ballybeg.

Of all the characters, Rose had the greatest transformation between acts one and two. She began the play wearing a floral dress with a large collar and a brown sweater. Layered on top of this, Rose wore an apron which was repurposed from an old pair of overalls. Rose wore this outfit with a pair of Wellington boots (see Figure B.11). This costume reflects the childlike nature of the character, and highlights the many layers of protection her sisters have imposed on her. In act two, Rose appeared wearing a thin blouse and blue knit cardigan with a fitted skirt, which she probably borrowed from

¹ Brian Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 1993), 45.

Agnes. Rose wore her newly repaired “Sunday shoes” with this outfit (see Figure B.12).

This change in costume emphasized Rose’s growing confidence and need to assert herself as an adult woman.

Chris’s costumes featured the most feminine silhouettes of all the sisters’ costumes. Chris is the only sister with a realistic love interest and hope for a future with him. This was reflected in the warm golden hue and flowing romantic silhouette of her floral dress in act one (see Figure B.13). During technical rehearsals, the dress appeared much brighter under lights than the other characters’ costumes, creating a somewhat garish orange color. At the director’s request, the costume designer tea-dyed Chris’s dress so that it would balance better with the other costumes onstage. Chris’s future becomes darker as the play draws to a close; Gerry is going away to war, and he will not return. Chris’s transition from hopeful lover to burdened wife was reflected in her more mature dark blue sweater, blue blouse, and brown skirt (see Figure B.14).

Concerning the men’s costumes, it was important for the costume designer and director to remain historically accurate as much as possible, while highlighting clothing details that would have been especially memorable to seven-year-old Michael. Michael’s most significant costume memory is Father Jack’s uniform (see Figure B.15). This uniform is seen during the play’s opening. Michael describes Father Jack’s appearance as “resplendent”² and “magnificent.”³ This same uniform is seen again at the end of the play, this time described as “very soiled, very crumpled.”⁴ The costume designer chose to construct one costume with removable pieces that would be crumpled and dirtied by the

² Ibid., 10.

³ Ibid., 17.

⁴ Ibid., 80.

wardrobe crew between the first and second acts of the play. This plan allowed responsible use of resources and complete freedom over the design. After the uniform issue had been solved, the designer moved on to Father Jack's other costumes.

Father Jack's act one costume consisted of dark pants, a white shirt, a large overcoat with gloves, and a hat (see Figure B.16). His act two costume consisted of pants and a sweater with multiple draped pieces which mimic the tribal dress of indigenous Ugandan people groups (see Figure B.17). This transformation helped to reinforce the idea that Father Jack's improving health is not connected to his re-assimilation into Irish culture. He is fully healed, but he will never again be fully Irish.

From initial design to performance, two aspects of Father Jack's costumes were changed. Initially, the designer was looking for some type of knit boot for him to wear, that would appear appropriate for the cold weather in Ireland but would allow for Father Jack to have free movement of his feet. The designer was unable to locate shoes that matched this description and were consistent with the rest of the design. Instead, Father Jack wore black leather shoes and simply pulled his socks up over his pants during act two. Additionally, the large-brimmed hat chosen for him to wear in act one was hiding too much of Father Jack's face and resembled a cowboy hat onstage. The hat was changed to a wool newsboy cap.

Gerry's costume consisted of one suit with separate pieces worn in different combinations from act to act (see Figures B.18 and B.19). He is a charmer, but not to be trusted. Thus the designer had the idea to dress him in such a way that indicates he knows how to put an outfit together, but he does not wear clothes well. The goal was to create the impression that something is just a bit "off" about him each time he is onstage.

Accordingly, his suit didn't fit quite properly, and his accessories (hat and tie) were never quite placed as they should be. The overall effect of this look is the impression of Gerry as a character whose potential to be a serious leading man is unraveling quickly and uncontrollably.

Finally, Michael Evans' costume stands out among the others since he is from a different time. The production team chose to set Michael's scenes in 1964, making him 35 years old. Michael wore straight-leg trousers and a red cable-knit sweater (see Figure B.20), which not only spoke to the time period, but also paid homage to his knitting aunts. Setting Michael in this time period allowed the makeup and hair designer to minimally alter his appearance, which was a priority.

Since the Mabee is an intimate space, makeup was best kept minimalistic and natural. All of the women wore basic stage makeup with subtle aging lines and very little additional color. There were two exceptions to this rule: Chris added lipstick in act two in keeping with her line in act one that she "might start wearing lipstick,"⁵ and Rose added a lip stain in act two after her encounter with Danny Bradley.

Given their economic status, the Mundy women would not have money to maintain salon-quality hairstyles, and the script dictates that their hair care routine is limited to sporadic washings ("Will you wash [my hair] for me tonight, Maggie?"⁶). Therefore, the hair for all of the women was given texture using curling and crimping irons, and then fastened in simple styles for the duration of the play. Kate had some grey applied to her hair in order to give an appearance of middle age. Most of the women did

⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁶ Ibid., 13.

not have significant hair changes, except Rose, whose hair went from braided pigtails in act one to an up-do in act two.

For the men, the makeup was similarly minimalistic with the exception of Father Jack. His hair was colored grey and in addition to age lines, the makeup designer added a touch of yellow to his skin and roughed up his facial hair for act one. Jack's makeup was then cleaned up for act two after he has fully recovered from malaria. Michael was given subtle age lines, which were adjusted over the course of tech week in order to make them appear as natural as possible. His hair was slicked back for a classic nineteen-sixties look. Gerry was given a basic corrective makeup treatment with subtle age lines. His hair was styled with a classic nineteen-thirties curl.

Overall, the costume and makeup designers' collaboration with one another and with the director and production team was successful in creating cohesive looks for each character. The designs were appropriate to the world of the play and helped to unify the production. The costumes were complimented and enhanced, especially during the opening tableau, by the lighting design (see Figure B.21).

Lighting Design

Early conversations about lighting focused on maintaining the femininity of the play by using warm tones and by highlighting Michael's memories with LED lights that would add an otherworldly effect to the stage picture. Finally, specific gobo patterns were selected that would contribute to the highly textured look the design team was hoping to achieve.

One of the most important tasks for the lighting designer was to aid in the transition from moments of narration to the action onstage. The lights need to guide the

audience's attention and keep the play moving from moment to moment. This proved challenging because in order to create seamless transitions, it was important for the director to avoid blackouts. The transition which posed the greatest challenge was the shift from Michael's monologue with the opening tableau into the first scene with the Mundy sisters. In order to keep the story moving, the lighting designer created a transitional lighting look (as opposed to a full blackout) and the sound designer agreed to fill the transition with appropriate music.

In the director's initial blocking plan, all of Michael's monologues were to be delivered from the aisles in the house, not from the stage. Therefore the lighting designer had originally planned cues to light various areas of the house. During the designer run of the production, the director determined that the play and actor playing Michael would be better served by moving most of his monologues onto the stage. This change necessitated collaboration with the lighting designer, who was gracious in attending rehearsals after the blocking changes were made and in rewriting cues. Not only did the lighting designer rewrite the cues to light Michael onstage, she was able to work with the director and actor playing Michael to create cues that accommodated his movement throughout the playing space. With a less collaborative lighting designer, this significant change in blocking may have resulted in a lesser quality lighting design. As it was, the overall look and feel of the production improved greatly because of the positive collaboration between the lighting designer, director, and actor.

Finally, since a cyclorama was used in lieu of a backdrop, the lighting designer was given the task of creating the multiple looks of a vibrant Irish sky in the distance.

These looks were achieved primarily through the use of blue light and glass gobos which created the appearance of photorealistic clouds.

The lighting designer discovered during load-in that the cyclorama that was originally planned to be used for the show would not fit in the space, so an alternative cyclorama had to be used. This cyclorama was a different material than planned for and was quite worn. It had stains from years of use and wrinkles from extended time in storage. The lighting designer immediately alerted the director to the problem, and proposed turning the cyclorama around and using the other side to minimize the look of the stains. The director and lighting designer also discussed asking the scenic and costume crews to work together to steam out the wrinkles. Within the week, the cyclorama was re-hung and steamed, lights were hung and focused, and there was virtually no appearance of stains or wrinkles at all on the lit cyclorama (see Figure B.5).

During technical rehearsals, the lighting designer and director worked with Michael to be more consistent with blocking during his monologues so that he would always be in his light. The lighting designer and director also worked together to eliminate a shadow that was being cast by the roof in the set. Because the area could not be fully lit, the director and lighting designer agreed to mark a spot on the stage for the actors to avoid. This solution, although perhaps simplistic, worked well, and was exemplary of the collaboration that occurred when director, designers, and actors communicated and were open to solving problems in the most positive ways.

Sound Design

Because of the significance of music (both live and recorded) in the play, there was a strong and productive collaboration between the music director, the sound

designer, the choreographer, and the director from the beginning of the production process.

Sound and music collaboration began with a list of every song in the play, with notes as to whether the music was live or recorded, who was singing, and whether there was choreography involved with each piece of music. From there, the music director acquired sample recordings of each song. The sound designer then created a playlist of options for each recorded sound in the play. The playlists generated by the music director and sound designer were compared, and the final music and sounds were selected for the production. The director, music director, and sound designer agreed that the more authentic the sounds, the better. Authenticity was important in terms of historically accurate song selection and in terms of the sound quality and instrumentation of the specific recordings selected. In order to reflect the tone of the play and stay relevant to the vision of the director, the design team considered alternatives to three pieces of music listed in the script.

When Gerry and Chris dance for the first time, the radio plays “a romantic song from the period.”⁷ While one published version of the script suggests playing a song called “Dancing in the Dark,” the production team agreed that the song was too heavy and gloomy for such a romantic moment. The song dragged and sounded more like a dirge than a love song. After researching songs from the period, the sound designer offered the alternative, “Just One More Chance” by Bing Crosby. This song flowed sweetly and felt more true to the intended romantic tone of the scene. Secondly, the music director and director opted to change the second instance of “Anything Goes” to a song called “Civilization (Bongo Bongo Bongo).” This song is lighthearted, like

⁷ Ibid., 42.

“Anything Goes,” but also has lyrics that reflect the change of heart Father Jack underwent when he was in Uganda. This song was a great fit for the hat trading ceremony which depicts Gerry and Jack’s kinship-like understanding of one another as citizens of the world (as opposed to Welshman and Irishman). Finally, the director asked the sound designer to provide alternative options to the closing song, “It is Time to Say Goodnight” to something a little less gloomy. Again, this choice was motivated by a collective desire to clearly reflect the tone of the play from moment to moment in a way that would translate appropriately to the Baylor audience. Ultimately, the sound designer found an alternative recording of “It is Time to Say Goodnight” that felt much lighter and more nostalgic than earlier versions, and the song remained in the production. The final person to weigh in on the song selection was the choreographer.

Because there is so much dancing in the play, it was important that the choreographer had a voice in the music selection and that she was given recordings as early as possible. The choreographed songs were selected first, and then sent to the choreographer for final approval before making recordings to be used in rehearsal and performance. Thanks to open communication and willing attitudes, recordings of each choreographed song were ready by the first week of blocking rehearsals, allowing the choreographer to work with the cast on the dances immediately. With the songs selected and rehearsal recordings distributed, the sound designer shifted his attention to atmospheric sounds and to creating the radio effects.

In terms of atmospheric sound cues, sound was used to enhance significant moments, but not to create a fully realistic world. The sounds that young Michael would have recalled became the key sounds to replicate in the play. For the beginning moments

of the show, the sound designer was tasked with creating an interesting, but not overbearing soundscape to cover the necessary short transition after the opening tableau. Second, the designer was asked to create a subtle rush of air suggesting fluttering birds' wings for the moment when Maggie releases an imaginary bird for Michael. This sound heightened the sense of wonder at Michael's memory: Was it real? Did Michael imagine the bird? Was anything there at all? Lastly, the sound designer was asked to create a simple soundscape for the top of act two that included church bells, which are referenced in a conversation between Maggie and Father Jack. The sound designer's final task requested by the director was to create underscoring for various moments during Michael's monologues.

For underscoring, the sound designer and director discussed the moments which would be enhanced by music, and then the designer created a playlist of songs for these moments. During technical rehearsals, the director and sound designer determined which scenes would ultimately be underscored with music.

The week before technical rehearsals, the sound designer sat in on a rehearsal and suggested creating a specific atmospheric sound cue for the closing moment of act one, when Father Jack does his rhythmic tribal dance. The sound designer created a track of rhythmic bird sounds, which the actor could respond to and use as motivation for his dance. This addition elevated the scene and helped to create a strong moment of storytelling.

During technical rehearsals, the director and sound designer collaborated to make the following changes: first, the sound cue of the flutter of wings during the scene where Maggie shows Michael the imaginary bird was cut, as it was not producing the effect the

director had hoped. Second, the underscores for most of Michael's monologues were unfortunately competing with the actor, so most of them had to be eliminated. The underscoring of the opening monologue was kept, and the underscore at the end of the play was also kept. Finally, the sound cues for the end of act one and beginning of act two were adjusted. Overall, the sound designer created a pleasing and appropriate aural atmosphere for *Dancing at Lughnasa*.

Prop Design

The prop designer was primarily tasked with pulling and/or purchasing necessary items for the production and with creating the few items that could not be purchased. The prop designer was not involved in the early design meetings. As is standard with Baylor theatre productions, prop designers join the production team when production meetings begin. After the second production meeting, the director, prop designer, and technical director met and compared their preliminary prop lists and discussed items in question. During this meeting, it was determined that Maggie would smoke tobacco-free herbal cigarettes (as opposed to using a vaporizer or prop cigarettes). The designer, director, and technical director also confirmed which food props would be edible (blueberries, eggs, basil, parsley, one loaf of bread), which could be simulated (all other packaged food products), and which would need to be authentic but would not be eaten onstage (ingredients for hen's mash, ingredients for soda bread, potatoes). Along with this discussion of food preparation came the decision that the props designer and scenic crew would work together to make it possible to cook eggs onstage. This meant that the stove would have to be built to accommodate electricity from some type of hot plate on which food could be cooked. Finally, the director confirmed that the costume designer would be

supplying the laundry for ironing, the surplice, and the shoes that Kate brings home from the repair shop. After this meeting, the prop designer began pulling props for use in rehearsal.

The stage manager worked closely with the prop designer to ensure that the majority of the necessary rehearsal props were in place for the first blocking rehearsal. During blocking rehearsals, it became apparent that much of the actors' work was contingent upon their familiarity with the props. There is an early scene in which the actress playing Kate must pull various groceries out of shopping bags. She names each item as she unpacks the bags, so it became quite important that the bags were packed with labeled rehearsal props in the same way each night. The prop designer was able to respond quickly to the director's request for more realistic looking props for these shopping bags (to help the actress identify each item quickly) and she agreed to secure the final props for this scene as soon as possible. This positive collaboration happened as a result of person-to-person communication, which the director would later learn is essential in creating a harmonious, unified production.

Over the course of blocking rehearsals, the question of whether the Marconi radio would be truly wireless and moveable was discussed. Although the director asked for this information in rehearsal reports multiple times, her queries went unanswered by the prop designer. During a production meeting, after blocking rehearsals concluded, the director confronted the prop designer about the radio. The prop designer explained that she had been waiting on information from the sound designer regarding speaker placement. The sound designer was waiting on word from the scenic designer regarding space in the set to hide speakers. Because the director chose to discuss the questions surrounding the

radio in the meeting with everyone present, the issue was quickly and easily resolved. The sound designer decided to place speakers below the hutch, making it possible for the prop designer to purchase a wireless countertop radio appropriate to the period. The prop designer agreed to alter the look of the radio to reflect research images the director supplied to her early in the process. This collaboration among the production team encouraged open lines of positive communication and ultimately prompted the addition of a new prop, which was offered by the music director.

At the close of act one, Friel's stage directions require that Father Jack "picks up two pieces of wood, portions of the kites, and strikes them together... He does it again – and again – and again. Now he begins to beat out a structured beat whose rhythm gives him pleasure... Jack begins to shuffle-dance in time to his tattoo."⁸ This rhythmic dance is repeated near the end of the play during the hat trading ceremony. After working with the actor on the music for this later scene, the music director proposed the idea for Father Jack to play the same rhythm on a drum. He provided the drum and the prop designer agreed to add fabric embellishments to make it appear more authentically Ugandan. This addition helped to create a more complete picture of Father Jack's value system and transformation, and exemplified the value of a collaborative production team.

The semester break seemed to be an unfortunate turning point in the director's collaboration with the prop designer. In hindsight, this is probably because communication came to a halt for approximately three weeks. Getting back into the swing of the new semester was difficult, and conflicting schedules prevented person-to-person communication. This limited communication, paired with a series of surprises, made for a challenging process.

⁸ Ibid., 52.

The props designer struggled to get the food props available for use in the production ahead of tech week. The director requested that ingredients for the hen mash, the soda bread, and the eggs be available to use before technical rehearsals, but the requests went unacknowledged at first. In a production meeting, the director requested that the food be provided as soon as possible. The props designer and technical director agreed to work on it, but did not state exactly when the food items would be made available. In hindsight, the director should have set a specific date for the food props to be procured.

As more rehearsals passed without getting the much needed props, the director requested that the stage management team go over the master prop list and make a separate list of everything that was missing, including an itemized ingredient list with exact amounts for the food items that needed to be prepared onstage. Once this list was made, the director asked the stage manager to set up a meeting with the props designer and costume designer to discuss the list and verify once again who was responsible for obtaining each prop. This meeting took several days to schedule, and the props designer was only available to meet for approximately fifteen minutes. The costume designer confirmed all of the props for which she was responsible and clarified the type and number of knitting needles the props department would need to provide. Unfortunately, the props designer was unable to go over the rest of the props with the stage manager and director.

Soon after this abbreviated meeting, during a walk-through of the set, the technical director expressed concern over a perceived exorbitant amount of new props being added to the prop list. The director clarified that although there were two new props

(loose tea and tea bags), everything else on the list was on the original prop list. The only difference between the two lists was that the latter list was itemized in an effort to better communicate with the props designer exactly what was required. After making contact with the props designer through a text message, the director met with the props designer prior to tech week and discussed the props list at great length. Meeting the designer in person proved to be much more productive than earlier communication attempts. The props designer and director created a prioritized prop list and were able to move forward.

The frustration with props was ultimately caused by a failure of communication on the part of the director. Had the director initially made the itemized list of ingredients a part of the preliminary prop list, and found the best way to communicate with the props designer earlier in the process, much of the frustration with props could have been avoided. As it was, the problems were solved, but unfortunately the cast was unable to work with many of the props until very late in the rehearsal process.

Even after the communication breakdown between director and props designer had cleared up, there were other problems that affected the show. First, prior to technical rehearsal, it came to the production team's attention that Baylor student health standards prohibited the smoking of any type of cigarettes on stage. Consequently, the herbal cigarettes which the props designer had originally planned on using had to be replaced with electronic cigarettes. This change was not preferable to anyone on the team; however, everyone accepted the change with grace.

Next, after observing how long it took to actually prepare food onstage, the director's faculty mentor strongly encouraged her to re-evaluate the necessity of cooking eggs onstage. The script calls for the eggs to be prepared, but the timing of the lines

spoken about the preparation of the food made it difficult to plan exactly when the eggs could be cooked. The logistics of cooking the eggs could only be solved by tedious trial and error. In evaluating the actual benefit of cooking the eggs onstage, which was minimal, as they would only be cooked and consumed in the final moments of the play, it became apparent that the benefit did not outweigh the cost in time, energy, and stress for the production team in solving how to get the eggs cooked.

While this change was made to alleviate stress, the technical director expressed frustration with this late change during the postmortem discussion. He explained that the scenic crew had already put effort into rebuilding the top of the stove to fit a griddle inside it and running electricity to the griddle so that the eggs could be cooked. All of this work had to be undone, and a new top had to be constructed for the stove. It is worth noting that this was also the only change that occurred without input from the designer involved or the technical director. These team members were informed of the decision rather than being a part of it. Although this was a change that was all but mandated by the director's faculty mentor, it is possible that the director could have handled informing the technical director of the change in such a way that he would feel included in the decision, rather than simply informed of it.

The next prop change occurred about halfway through tech week. The prop designer, director, and technical director were faced with a frustrating trend: the paper flour bag was breaking as the crew and actors handled it. The flour was replaced twice, only to have the bag break each time. While discussing this frustration in a post-rehearsal tech meeting, the costume designer's faculty mentor suggested that she bring in a calico fabric bag to hold the flour, which would also be period-appropriate.

The final prop change came quite late in the process: after the departmental preview. One of Baylor Theatre's staff members is a professional calligrapher, and noticed that the pen being used onstage with the inkwell was not the correct type of pen. She emailed the director and offered a more appropriate pen to be borrowed for the run of the show. The director then contacted the relevant members of the design team to run the idea by them. The technical director and props designer deferred to the director, and the pen was used in the production.

Throughout the production process, many challenges came up, both avoidable and outside of the control of the production team. With each challenge, the smoothness and efficacy of coming up with a solution was directly proportional to the willingness and ability of those involved to communicate and work together for the good of the production. While there were things about the process that the director will do differently in the future, she will continue to prioritize and foster healthy communication and a collaborative environment in any production team on which she serves. As will be seen in the next chapter, the director took this same collaborative approach in her work with actors.

CHAPTER FOUR

Work with Actors

Introduction

The director's approach to working with actors in *Dancing at Lughnasa* was similar to her approach to working with designers. In both cases, the director valued collaboration and equal partnership in crafting the play. The director made it a priority to cultivate a supportive ensemble through fostering an open and collaborative rehearsal environment. While the director maintains these are hallmarks of a healthy ensemble, she learned through the rehearsal process that her strengths in community building and empathy have the potential to become significant weaknesses and therefore negatively impact the performance.

Auditions and Casting

When *Dancing at Lughnasa* was announced as part of the 2016-2017 mainstage season, many of the undergraduate actors at Baylor expressed excitement that there were so many great female roles in the play. These roles deviated from the ingénue type which is so frequently represented on the Baylor stage. The characters are multi-dimensional, are mature in age, and are not required to be classically beautiful. The students were excited because this play offered roles for actors who had not yet received opportunities to perform on the mainstage. As auditions approached, several students approached the director with questions regarding what was desired for each character in the play. The

director had identified certain characteristics that she needed to see in actors portraying each role.

For Michael, it was imperative to cast an engaging storyteller. Because Michael speaks most of his lines directly to the audience, he needed to seem personable and approachable. The actor also needed to be able to convincingly portray both the adult narrator and the child Michael. Finally, the actor needed to be able to convey, without sentimentality, that he is emotionally invested in the story.

Chris, the female ingénue in the play, needed to be able to express the charming innocence of a love interest, and also balance that with a sense of motherly responsibility to her son, Michael. Finally, the actress portraying Chris needed to be able to convey hope for the future, as her character's primary objective is to hold the family together even as it is falling apart.

Kate is the only wage-earner in the play. As such, she is under a tremendous amount of pressure to keep her job in order to continue to provide for the family. Kate is a devout Catholic, and understands that her family's reputation directly impacts her position in the parish school. Therefore, the actress playing Kate needed to be able to convey deep conviction balanced with love for her family.

Maggie is the second sister, and the housekeeper in the family. She makes it her priority to bring joy into sad situations, and she does this through humor and song. Further, Maggie spends the most time onstage with the child Michael. She often tells him riddles, and teases him. With these things in mind, it was important for the actress playing Maggie to be a good singer, have strong comedic timing, and be comfortable working alone onstage (as child Michael is not seen).

Agnes is protective not only of Rose, but also of all her sisters. She is sensitive to her sisters' emotions and often attempts to alleviate stressful situations. However, this sensitivity also leaves Agnes vulnerable to her own emotions, and she sometimes struggles to maintain control of them. She alternately withdraws into her knitting and acts out to release her frustration, especially against Kate. The actress playing Agnes needed to be emotionally perceptive and comfortable portraying emotional vulnerability onstage.

Rose is perhaps one of the most challenging characters in the play. She is described by Brian Friel as simple, suggesting a cognitive delay of some type. Rose spends her days asserting her knowledge and autonomy to her sisters, who treat her as though she is a child. The actress playing Rose needed to be open-minded like a child, but also firm in her convictions, like someone who desires to be taken seriously. She also needed to be able play the role honestly, avoiding any sense of caricature.

Father Jack is struggling with disorientation and a physical illness during the first act of the play. By the second act, Father Jack is physically well, but he still does not feel quite at home. The Father Jack of act two is more like a shaman than a priest. His spirit is no longer satisfied in Ballybeg with its Catholic strictures and closed culture. He attempts to share his spiritual enlightenment with his sisters, who insist that he must continue to work to get back to who he used to be. The actor playing Father Jack had to have a strong sense of physicality so that he could make a distinction between act one and act two. He also needed to be an actor who could convincingly play an eccentric whose seeming random antics are grounded in reality. He must express genuine wisdom and understanding, rather than odd and unmotivated behavior.

Gerry is a fun-loving free spirit on the surface, but he is dealing with the weight of his decision to join the International Brigade and the struggle between wanting to enjoy his relationship with Chris and knowing he is not ready to be a father to Michael. He hides behind his outward showmanship, rarely revealing his true feelings. The actor playing Gerry had to be first and foremost charming, to justify the fact that Chris and Agnes both find Gerry irresistible. Further, the actor would need to be a skilled singer and dancer, consistent with the character's nature as a showman. Finally, the actor playing Gerry needed to be able to express his internal struggle between his free-spirited nature and his desire to build a life with Chris.

All of the actors would need to learn and execute a consistent dialect, as well as dance and sing. Actors were requested to use a Northern Irish dialect for auditions. The dialect coach made resources available online and made himself available for individual and group coaching prior to auditions. Rather than incorporating a separate song and dance audition, the choreographer and music director consulted with the director and commented on who possessed the necessary skills for each role. Had this not been an educational environment with professors serving in the roles of choreographer and music director, there would have been a separate music and dance audition as a part of the callbacks. Since the professors knew the students well, the production team felt comfortable gauging the actors' readiness for the roles.

For the audition, the director provided six monologues (three for men, three for women) from a variety of Friel plays. The monologues were chosen to reflect aspects of multiple characters in the play. Actors were asked to choose and prepare a monologue that aligned with the character(s) they were interested in playing. After the initial

audition, selected actors were called back to read scenes from the play with potential acting partners. In callbacks, the director was looking for actors who worked well together and who were able to take direction.

The first set of callbacks focused on the character of Michael. Actors were asked to read a portion of one of Michael's monologues while standing in the house of the Mabee theatre. The actors' comfort and ability to project their voices from this position was important, as the director planned to block most of Michael's scenes with the actor among the audience. After the actors read their monologues, the actresses called back for the role of Maggie were asked to read a scene with child Michael. The actors remained in the house for these readings, while the actresses performed the scene onstage. Maggie has the most scenes with child Michael, so it was imperative to cast an actress who was not only able to carry a scene with an imaginary character, but one who was also able to keep her focus while speaking with imaginary character. After each actor had read the scene with at least one partner, the actors called back for Michael were released. The actor ultimately cast as Michael was a younger actor who exuded authentic friendliness, which made him accessible to the audience. With Michael cast, the actors called for Father Jack were asked to read a scene with the actresses playing Maggie.

The scene chosen for the audition was Father Jack's first appearance in act two. The scene allowed actors to explore physicality and appearance of an aged man. The actors approached the character of Father Jack in many different ways. Ultimately, the director chose a more experienced actor who performed the character with a sense of dignity. This actor's Father Jack commanded respect from the other characters onstage with him.

Next, the actors being considered for the roles of Chris and Gerry were called in to audition. While there were multiple actors who could have performed the roles of Chris and Gerry, it was a priority that they have believable chemistry together. They needed to be comfortable enough with one another that they would be able to portray vulnerability onstage together, and they needed to look like a couple. The actors read the scene when Gerry arrives at the cottage. The scene was repeated multiple times with multiple actor pairings. Once everyone had read the scene at least once, the director began asking actors to make adjustments to the playing of the scene. She observed which actors were able to successfully take direction. The actors cast in the roles were chosen as a result of their embodiment of the roles, their chemistry with one another, and their enthusiastic willingness to try the scene in different ways as requested by the director. The actress cast as Chris was truthful and seemed genuinely conflicted about whether she should be talking with Gerry. The actor cast as Gerry was the only actor who was able to take the note to flirt with his scene partners. Further, he brought a sense of playfulness to the role which played nicely off the earnest thoughtfulness of the actress cast as Chris. With the three male characters and one female character cast, the director shifted focus to the remaining four sisters.

The actresses called back for the roles of the Mundy sisters were asked to read two scenes which required a high emotional investment. The director's primary goal was to see which actresses were comfortable expressing vulnerability with each other. This also allowed the director to see which actresses were able to convincingly embody a highly emotional state, while maintaining clarity of objective and speech. The actresses cast as Kate, Maggie, Agnes, and Rose all proved themselves capable of the complex

emotional content of the play, and they worked well together onstage. Although each actor and actress cast was a great fit for his or her role, the director's choices presented a significant challenge: of the eight actors selected, four had never been cast in a mainstage production. Some faculty members expressed concern over the inexperience of the cast. As a response to this concern, the director collaborated with faculty mentors to formulate a plan to support the growth of these less experienced actors and protect the quality of the production.

Rehearsal Preparation

It was apparent that the cast of *Dancing at Lughnasa* would need significant training and support in order to become a successful ensemble. With this in mind, the director's faculty mentor suggested that she map out on paper the characters' objectives and tactics from unit to unit. As part of her usual preparation process, the director created a spreadsheet identifying units and French scenes throughout the play. Incorporating the advice of her faculty mentor, the director also added dramatic action and objectives to her graphic map of the play. This addition, while time consuming, proved to be very useful, particularly in the early stages of rehearsal, when characters and actions were discussed.

Before rehearsals began, the director spent time with several cast members to discuss their characters' development over the course of the play. The actors benefitted from being able to think and work through the play informally with the director. These informal conversations also helped the director to make decisions about the most effective way to guide the cast in approaching their roles. The director consulted David Kaplan's *Five Approaches to Acting* and found that the storytelling approach was useful in providing an actable way for the cast to approach their monologues in the play.

Kaplan's storytelling approach includes a method of breaking down stories into basic elements: events, character quotes, descriptions, and words that call attention to the story as a story. Treating each element differently gives structure and meaning to a monologue that tells a story. Since all of the monologues in the play are stories, the director chose to work with the cast on honing their storytelling skills using Kaplan's method. While this technique would be appropriate for the entire play, the director felt strongly that it would be more suitable for the inexperienced cast to approach the majority of the text as realism, using techniques with which the cast was already very familiar. Thus, the director planned to work with the storytelling approach most frequently with the actor playing Michael, and to invoke this approach with the other characters only when they had a monologue telling a story. By the time rehearsal began, the director felt prepared to lead the enthusiastic cast in taking on the challenge of *Dancing at Lughnasa*.

Table Work

As the director reflected on opportunities for growth identified over the course of her graduate studies, she recognized that she tends to rush through the important phase of table work. With an inexperienced cast, the work of examining character and play development was going to be especially vital to the success of the production. For this reason, the director set a goal to spend more time discussing character and play development with actors than she had done during past productions. Inspired by the work of Chicago director, Robin Witt, with whom she had worked over the summer, the director utilized the methodology described in *The Director's Craft* by Katie Mitchell. Mitchell's approach to analysis and table work is grounded in teaching actors how to ask

questions of the play and then how to mine the text for answers. After a thorough examination of the text itself, research is then undertaken to find answers to remaining questions. The director typically does this work independently, before rehearsals begin; the process is repeated with the cast during the table work phase of rehearsal.

At the first read-through of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the director invited the cast to keep a running list of questions which emerged from their reading of the text, leaving space for answers to be filled in later. After the initial reading of the script, the cast and director discussed some of the questions regarding plot and given circumstances. These questions were, for the most part, easily resolved by discussion and comparison of each artist's reading of the script. After each rehearsal, the cast was asked to find answers to at least one of their questions that required further research before the next day's rehearsal. These questions and answers served as a guide for the following table work sessions.

During table work, the actors were invited to begin rehearsals with big questions which they felt had not been sufficiently answered in previous rehearsals or in their own research. After a brief discussion of these (primarily philosophical) questions, the cast began once again to read the play. This time, the cast was encouraged to stop the reading any time a question or an answer to a question arose. While this manner of working was a bit tedious, it was immensely helpful in clarifying dramatic action and in character development. Furthermore, this detailed mining of the script with the ensemble led to discoveries that may have otherwise gone unnoticed.

The first significant discovery was the revelation that Danny Bradley was involved with Rose even while his wife was present and active in his life. Rose recounts the story of Danny giving her a Christmas gift nine months prior to the action of the play.

In her defense of Danny, Rose tells Chris that Mrs. Bradley left the family “six months ago.”¹ This information sadly reveals the depth of Rose’s delusion about Danny Bradley’s character. He is cheating on his wife and is therefore not trustworthy. This also indicates that Rose’s explanation in act two of what happened when she met Danny in the back hills is not reliable. She is withholding information intentionally, to be sure, but she is also caught up in a false and dangerous illusion of Danny Bradley. While it is uncertain what actually happened between Rose and Danny in the back hills, it is clear that Rose does not see the flaws in Danny’s character, and therefore is unlikely to acknowledge that he has taken advantage of her.

The next significant discovery made was the revelation that Kate comes home with so many groceries, which include small gifts for several family members, because she is stocking up for the future. She has just discovered that her job is in jeopardy. Kate does not know when she will be able to afford to shop for groceries, let alone gifts, again.

The final discovery made during table work was a simple clarification of dramatic action. The church bells at the top of the second act signify not only the marriage of Austin Morgan, but also the non-traditional marriage ritual of Gerry and Chris. In one of his act one monologues, Michael describes this ceremony as his parents dancing in ritual circles around the garden with no music. Upon their entrance into the garden, the following exchange takes place:

GERRY: Let’s dance round the garden again.

CHRIS: We’ve done that; and down the lane and up again – without music. And that’s enough for one day.²

¹ Brian Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 1993), 14.

² Ibid., 61.

Chris describes, in less romantic terms, the same ceremony that Michael described earlier in the play. This information explains why Chris's expectations of Gerry have altered. In act one, Chris anticipated Gerry leaving her and did not expect him to return. After their ritual marriage, Chris expects Gerry to play a more consistently active role in the family, starting with him fixing the wireless. Her concerns have shifted from those of a hopeful lover to those of a wife depending on her husband. The marriage also makes sense of Gerry's reluctance to honor Chris's request that he attempt to fix the radio. The Gerry of act one was eager to show off to his lover. Now, after having "married," Gerry is concerned about not living up to Chris's expectations. Discovering the marriage ceremony and its proximity to the events of act two intensify not only the initial moments that Chris and Gerry share onstage, but also the tension between Gerry, Chris, and Agnes once the radio is finally fixed. Discoveries made during early table work proved valuable in understanding the dramatic action and the characters' motivations from moment to moment in the play.

The final rehearsal spent at the table was with the dialect coach. The director and dialect coach had decided that getting the cast on a good footing with the Northern Ireland dialect was imperative to a successful rehearsal process. The cast met with the dialect coach to learn and practice common sounds they would come across in transcribing their lines into the Northern Ireland dialect. After listening to examples and practicing difficult sounds in a group setting, the actors were then encouraged to work on their dialects while memorizing their lines. Meetings with the dialect coach continued on a one-on-one basis, as needed by each actor throughout the rehearsal process. The table

work period of rehearsal was productive and set the tone for a positive, collaborative rehearsal process.

Blocking Rehearsals

Before blocking rehearsals began, the choreographer worked with the cast on the Irish dance and the ballroom dances. The actor playing Father Jack worked one on one with the choreographer to develop his tribal dance outside of rehearsal time. Following these choreography sessions, the director worked with the cast to develop the opening tableau of the production. Since *Dancing at Lughnasa* is a memory play, it was important to approach the initial stage picture as the image Michael held in his memory of that moment during the summer of 1936. The cast was asked to work together to create a tableau depicting what they imagined to be the actual Mundy family dynamic. After this initial exercise, each cast member was asked to tweak the tableau to show how their character personally viewed the family dynamics, for better or for worse. Finally, the actor playing Michael was asked to create a tableau of the family as they truly existed, and then to adjust his own tableau to show the memory which Michael chose to share with the audience in the opening moments of the play. This exercise helped the actors to see the points of view of the other characters and to more firmly shape their own character's point of view. Further, it helped solidify what it meant to approach the play as Michael's memory, as opposed to a presentation of presumed fact. The different "family portraits," created by eight different actors with unique points of view of the same story, helped to illuminate the ways in which the story might differ if told by a different family member, and the unique ways in which audience members watching the play would experience the story. Blocking the play proceeded from the idea that each audience

member would receive a slightly different version of the play, depending on where they sat, which would allow them to draw different conclusions about the story as it unfolded.

The play was blocked largely out of order. This process was as smooth as could be expected, but did create some difficulty, as it was sometimes a challenge to track what had already happened or had not yet happened from moment to moment in the play. Further, this meant that the actor playing Michael was not called frequently, so that although the story was told from his character's perspective, the actor was somewhat disconnected from what was happening in the play. Ultimately, this was not a good choice for the betterment of the play.

Overall, the blocking rehearsals were smooth and they proceeded organically, primarily led by the instincts of the actors, with the director stepping in to make adjustments for clarity of story or to accommodate sight lines. The director's focus during blocking rehearsals was the overall shape and feel of the play, not on the quality of acting. Once a basic shape and movement pattern was established, the scenes could be reworked and tweaked. Blocking rehearsals concluded at the end of the fall semester, with a full run of the show for the designers.

The designer run exposed flaws in the director's blocking approach and illuminated areas for the director to work on following the semester break. The scheduling of blocking rehearsals was not productive in terms of storytelling or ensemble building. Ultimately, the result of poor scheduling was disjointed scenes and lost collaborative momentum for the ensemble. The cast was unable to work as a strong unit because they had spent so many rehearsals away from one another. The director prioritized concerns to be addressed in working rehearsals after the semester break.

There were three basic problems that needed to be solved during the working phase. First, the director's choice to keep Michael in the house for the duration of the play was not working. Not only was the actor having trouble connecting to the story, and thus, to the audience, but he was also left with very limited movement choices, inhibiting his acting severely. Second, the cast was not making strong acting choices in general; observers noted that it felt like the cast was letting the dialect do the acting for them, rather than pursuing objectives. Finally, the director needed to have a firmer hand in the shaping of the piece. Many opportunities were missed to create strong stage pictures that would increase interest and conflict, but the director had held back on making stronger choices in favor of the actors feeling comfortable. Allowing the actors to lead in the blocking process had successfully given the cast ownership of the play; however, the director was overly sensitive to the perceived needs of the actors. This happened most frequently in moments where a stronger acting or blocking choice was needed in order to convey the dramatic action, but the actors found themselves unable to motivate such a choice. The director often allowed the weaker choice to remain, in hope that once the actor was off book, he/she would be able to revisit the moment and make a better choice. This logic was flawed because it was inherently a waste of valuable rehearsal time. Furthermore, the cast was not experienced enough to be able to gauge the efficacy of their choices on their own. The director ultimately had to go back and re-block much of the play during the working phase. This could have been avoided by a firmer hand and less permissive attitude during blocking rehearsals.

The director met with the cast after the designer run and gave general notes encouraging the cast to return to the basics: what does their character want in each

moment, how are they going to get it? The director also encouraged the actor playing Michael to find more emotional resonance with each of his monologues by making substitutions so that he could more readily identify with the emotional tone of each of his monologues. The actors were finally reminded that they were expected to be fully off book when rehearsals resumed after the holidays.

Working Rehearsals

Returning to rehearsal after the semester break brought a particular set of challenges. While the director was pleasantly surprised that all of the actors were off book, she was disappointed to see no improvement in acting. Further, unanticipated setbacks caused a significant delay in the actors' progress. The first week back at rehearsal immediately followed sorority recruitment. Most of the cast had been involved with recruitment as members of various Greek organizations. In addition to feeling tired and worn down, most of the cast had been exposed to an illness over the course of recruitment. The cast was slow moving, easily fatigued, and many actors were outwardly sick. As this illness made its way through the cast, rehearsals became unproductive. There was one instance when the director ended rehearsal early because progress was so slow and morale so low. Ultimately, the first week designated for working rehearsals was sacrificed. During the next week, new concerns arose.

Once the cast was well, getting back to work on the play proved exciting. The director re-blocked Michael's scenes to get him onstage as much as possible. This change had a positive impact on the show overall: with Michael onstage during the scenes with child Michael, he was able to fully explore the child character, essentially stepping into the role of his seven-year-old self. While his scene partners still did not acknowledge the

actor, the audience was able to clearly see that during these scenes Michael was recalling an event from his own childhood and immersing himself in the memory. The actor's emotional connection to the monologues improved daily, and as he was given consistent feedback about his body language, he steadily became more relaxed and natural onstage. His pacing was still a little too slow, so the director spent some time outside of rehearsal running the monologues with a timer. This exercise ultimately over-corrected the pace problem, and the director began giving the actor notes not to rush. The actor's enthusiasm to grow and improve his performance made for a positive rehearsal environment.

Similarly, the other actors were eager to take direction and make changes to the betterment of the production. However, the director noticed that the cast was generally reluctant to make acting choices beyond what was specifically requested of them. Additionally, they had trouble committing fully to the choices they did make. Now that the scripts were out of their hands, the actors were free to make the bold choices the director was looking for, but it quickly became clear that many of the actors simply lacked the skill to make and commit to such choices. For example, the sisters had fallen into a habit of playing the end result of the play, focusing on the tragedy during even their most joyful moments. When given notes to correct this, the actors would play the scene almost the same. They simply had trouble making good strong choices. In response to these habits, the director began giving more detailed and specific direction to each actor, leaving less for the actors to decide for themselves. Further, the director began using firmer language, rather than suggestion, in hopes of quickly bringing the production back on track. Most actors responded positively to this change in approach; however, it was clear that one actress was struggling more than the others.

The actress playing Kate had a hard time connecting her ideas of what was going on in the play with what she was doing onstage. She had a firm intellectual understanding of who the character was, but it was not coming across in her performance. Faculty members who had been invited to watch rehearsals and offer notes took notice of this and attempted to identify choices the actress could make that would be clearer onstage. Unfortunately, as a result of so many people attempting to help the actress in their own unique way, the actress was faced with multiple interpretations of the same character, creating more confusion than clarity. This confusion led to a decrease in the actress's already low self-confidence.

Upon reflection, the director determined the best way to proceed was to discuss the situation honestly with the actress. The director and actress met outside of rehearsal to discuss the seemingly conflicting feedback. The director was intentional about validating the actress's feelings, and offered strategies for the actress to bolster her confidence. More importantly, the director clarified for the actress that the feedback she was getting was not so much conflicting, as it was coming from different perspectives. Once the actress understood that the feedback she was getting was less a reflection of her performance and more about the many different ways of interpreting a character, she was able to trust her own interpretation and begin making choices that contributed to the storytelling. The director's empathy and open line of communication with the actress provided a way for the work of the production to get back on track. Had the director at any point showed a lack of confidence in the actress, the actress would have sensed it and given up completely. Instead, the actress was supported and eventually renewed her commitment to telling the story well.

It was important to the director and to the actress to support all of Kate's controlling behaviors with love and genuine care for her family. She is domineering and intolerant, but not for the sake of being difficult. She behaves in this way because she understands what is at stake if the family does not restore its reputation. The actress had been given notes to show more love for her family, but she saw actions that seemed self-centered and controlling during certain moments in the play. This was frustrating for the actress. The actress's honesty about the source of her frustration led the director to clarify with her the difference between the character's objective (to maintain the family reputation- a loving goal) and her tactics in achieving it (almost consistently to control, or to demand compliance). This Stanislavski-based approach also helped clarify for the actress why different faculty mentors were offering different suggestions. Some were speaking to the super objective over the course of the play, and others were speaking to moment-by-moment tactics. This clarifying discussion helped the actress make sense of everything she had been told, and in turn her confidence improved greatly. She was finally able to focus on making all of those motives clear in her actions. This conversation also revealed that the director had been negligent during the earliest rehearsals when discussing character development. She had taken the actress's ability to discuss the character intellectually as indication that she understood and was prepared to play the objectives and tactics of each scene. Once again, this severity of this problem could have been less extreme had the director used earlier rehearsals more efficiently and expected clearer acting choices during blocking rehearsals.

In an effort to get the actress's performance on the right track, the director and actress worked page-by-page through the script on the stage before and after rehearsals.

The actress performed her movement onstage and stopped to ask questions and make adjustments as requested by the director. She benefitted greatly from this dedicated time to walk through her scenes. The affirmation that her choices were strong paired with the time to practice and repeat her scenes without the rest of the cast present seemed to take a weight off the actress's shoulders and allowed her to put more energy and confidence into her performance. By the time tech rehearsals commenced, the actress was still not quite ready, but she had come a long way and was committed to meeting with the director outside of rehearsal time to improve her performance.

Other actors struggled with less comprehensive, but equally significant challenges as working rehearsals progressed. The actor playing Gerry struggled to master his Welsh dialect. The dialect is notably challenging, and the actor worked faithfully with the dialect coach to perfect each sound. Unfortunately, he just never quite mastered it. As a consequence, the actor was often so focused on the dialect in rehearsal that acting choices became secondary concerns. The director suggested that the actor spend time offstage practicing speaking in dialect during rehearsal in order to bolster his confidence and skill. The actor did attempt this, but it was ultimately not as effective as the director had hoped. The dialect challenges overshadowed the storytelling and affected the production in a negative way.

The role of Gerry is difficult to portray, because he is not safe, but he must be legitimately irresistible. Chris genuinely loves him, and that means the actor must reconcile making him loveable, while knowing that he is dishonest. On top of this, the character struggles with his desires to be both a companion to Chris and to be free to do as he pleases. These conflicts would be a challenge for any actor. Many conversations

between the director and actor took place in an effort to reconcile Gerry's conflicting desires. The actor felt strongly that Gerry was not a good person, and, in hindsight, it is likely that the director didn't steer the actor away from judgment of his character strongly enough. The director gave notes to the actor suggesting different perspectives and motivations, but ultimately the actor's performance did not achieve the clarity and depth that it needed. As with most acting issues that arose throughout the process, this issue could have been minimized if the director had been persistent about how the character should be played from the earliest rehearsals.

The week prior to technical rehearsals, the actors began working with the consumable food props. This took place much later in the process than expected and consequently required several blocking changes. The actors adjusted quickly to these changes, however, and their work with the food rang true in performance. The director's choice to eliminate the cooking of the eggs necessitated further blocking changes, but was ultimately more of a relief for the actors than a source of frustration. As stated in Chapter Three, this was a positive change and nothing was lost by the audience in experiencing the play.

Technical Rehearsals and Performance

Technical rehearsals began with a run-through for the crew. The actors responded positively to having even a small audience present in the house. Projection and articulation, which had been a challenge throughout the process, seemed to improve when the actors became aware that there were audience members seated far from the stage. Additionally, moments of humor in the play that had fallen flat over the course of rehearsals were energized as a result of the actors hearing laughter in the audience. The

actor playing Michael particularly benefitted from having an audience. His performance, which was still quite stiff at that point, seemed more relaxed as he was able to interact with people. The crew run was overall strong and the director felt confident moving into cue-to-cue and dress rehearsals.

The cue to cue rehearsal was scheduled to take two days, but thanks to the diligence of the designers and the strong communication between stage management and crew, it only took one day of rehearsal to work through every cue in the show. This allowed an additional run of the show with technical elements in place. During technical rehearsals, the director took note of design elements which were appropriate or not appropriate, and recommended changes as necessary. The majority of these changes are detailed in Chapter Three. One technical issue addressed during tech week affected an actor significantly.

While most of the scenic work had been finished prior to the start of tech week, the tree was not in place or ready to be climbed until a few days before tech, so the actor playing Gerry had very little time to work with the tree prior to opening. Much of the director's attention was on ensuring that Gerry was both safe while in the tree, and also that he was not pulling focus from other scenes happening onstage. The actor playing Gerry was diligent to listen to the other actors onstage and worked to find ways to escape the tree and exit offstage during the sensitive moments in the play. The only significant issue that arose during this short time of adjustment was the appearance of instability while the actor was in the tree. Although he was always safe, the tree itself swayed with his weight at times, making it appear as though he was not completely safe. The technical director worked with the actor on where and how he should shift his weight to control

movement of the tree. The result was that it only looked dangerous during the moments in the play when Gerry was in a precarious position. Technical rehearsals ended on a satisfying and positive note, and the production team moved smoothly into the departmental preview and performance week.

During the departmental preview, and throughout the performance week, the actors' performances grew steadily. Aware that the actors were going to need to continue their work on projection and articulation, the director asked the actress playing Rose to coordinate and lead pre-performance warmups. The cast faithfully warmed up and the audiences reported very few instances of having trouble hearing the actors.

Having an audience always changes the dynamic of a performance. Audiences provide energy and confidence to actors, who thrive on positive feedback. The actress playing Kate made remarkable progress as she performed in front of an audience. She was more in tune with the character, and less preoccupied with thinking through her every move onstage. She was even able to maintain character through a significant accident: during her first scene, one of Michael's kites somehow became attached to her burlap grocery bag and she dragged it inside the kitchen. Without missing a beat, the actress playing Chris acknowledged the kite, and the actress playing Kate remarked how good it looked (a variation of the scripted lines) and then she calmly put the kite away in the cabinet. Other actors' performances grew in intensity and clarity in response to the confidence that the actress playing Kate exuded while in front of an audience. In the same way that having an audience made the actors stronger, the preview audience also allowed the director to see that there were a few moments that were not reading as intended.

Chris and Gerry's first scene together is tricky, because although Chris does love Gerry, she must be guarded. It became apparent after audience feedback that this guarded attitude was breaking down when the actress began playfully dancing with Gerry after he mentioned teaching dancing lessons. The director and actors spent a few minutes prior to opening reworking that moment to make it more consistent with the characters, and it resulted in a much stronger playing of the scene.

The director also discovered from audience feedback that the tragic events between Rose and Danny Bradley were not reading as tragic, but as sweet and melancholy. The director's original intent was to be true to the characters by allowing each actress to interpret what had happened with Rose and Danny Bradley. This simply did not work in the way the director had hoped. The Mundy sisters' reactions were too content, as the actresses were interpreting a much more innocent liaison than the script (however guardedly) suggests. The director asked the actresses to play the scene as if each character is certain the worst has happened to Rose: a sexual encounter that they all fear. This adjustment brought the needed darkness to the scene and freed the actress playing Rose to explore the full range of what she was feeling but had been reluctant to express. Interestingly, though not inexplicably, this adjustment to Rose's homecoming scene completely changed the tone of Rose's entrance with her dead pet rooster. In rehearsal, the actress playing Rose had been nearly despondent. She was uninterested in her sisters' attempts to first gain more information and then to comfort her. In performance, after the change in the earlier scene, the actress playing Rose was much more emotional, and almost confrontational in this scene. The stakes were raised and the closing scene was made much stronger.

Conclusion

The process of working with actors on *Dancing at Lughnasa* was both challenging and rewarding. The director set out to make the actors equal partners in the creative process, and for the most part, this was a successful endeavor. In hindsight, however, there are some things that the director would have done differently. She gave too much leniency and not enough specific direction to the inexperienced cast during early rehearsals. Further, the director allowed circumstances that were not ideal for the actors (illness, struggling with dialect) to overshadow the work that needed to be done during rehearsal. These issues could ultimately have been minimized by better time management. The next chapter will reflect on the director's performance overall and provide recommendations for improvement in future projects.

CHAPTER FIVE

Reflection

Introduction

The process of mounting a production is always challenging yet rewarding. A director encounters a script that resonates with him/her, seeks to ignite the same passion for the story in the design team, and then begins the work of bringing the play to life with a group of actors. Throughout the process, the director must define her vision of the play and maintain control over every aspect of the production. Once the play is in performance, the director hears audience feedback and is afforded the opportunity to reflect on her work. This reflection leads to the director identifying areas in which she was successful and areas in which the production could have been more successful. The lessons learned can be taken forward to make the director's work stronger in the future.

Concerning *Dancing at Lughnasa*, there are several things the director could have done differently to craft a stronger production. The most prominent lesson learned by the director in the process of bringing *Dancing at Lughnasa* to the Baylor stage was how very important it is for the director to be a strong leader and caretaker of the production. From collaboration with designers and the production team to work with actors, it is clear that the director must never allow his/her effort to create a harmonious work environment to overshadow her position as ultimate authority over the production.

Audience Response

The audience response to Baylor's production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* was generally positive. The director appreciated hearing audience commentary on the beauty of the production as a whole, and particularly enjoyed watching older patrons seemingly lose themselves in the music at different moments in the performance. These patrons became an example of the phenomenal power of music that Michael describes in his closing monologue. Much of the positive feedback concerning acting was focused on the authentic sound of the Northern Irish dialects and the palpable excitement during the Irish dance. Audiences also enjoyed watching Father Jack demonstrate the Ryangan ceremony and reported that they were impressed by the performance of the actor playing Michael. Several undergraduate audience members reported that they were pleasantly surprised by the humor in the play. Finally, the director was pleased by the discussions which took place between audience members regarding the story and themes in the play.

When in the trenches of a production, it becomes easy for a director to lose sight of the story she sets out to tell. The director was pleased to participate in talkbacks with Baylor students after the production. Through these conversations, the director found that audiences were not just walking away from the production pleased with a beautiful sensory experience. They also left the performance with thoughts about the content and meaning of the play. These students were eager to discuss whether Kate or Father Jack was "right," or whether being "right" even mattered. They expressed shock over Gerry's secret family and wondered why Michael never told his mother about this revelation. Was it denial or a wish to preserve her positive image of the man she loved? They expressed sorrow over Rose's encounter with Danny Bradley, and asked the director to

confirm that the white rooster dying was a metaphor for her lost innocence at the hands of Danny. As a result of these talkbacks, the director was assured that she had done her job well in telling the story. In addition to generally positive audience response, the director was successful in several areas over the course of the production process.

Successes

The most important goal in any production is to tell the story clearly. The director has struggled in the past with clarity of storytelling. She has often found herself consumed with details of conceptual significance and consequently overlooking the narrative. This production proved to be a successful departure from these bad habits. The director credits this growth to her commitment to a production concept that kept the story at its center, and to her time spent doing table work early in the rehearsal process. The director will carry this story-centered approach with her in future productions, with confidence that prioritizing the narrative does not have to compromise beauty in the production.

The production itself was cohesive and beautiful. The colors and textures of the design elements blended into one another, so that no element was out of place. The choreographed dances were integrated seamlessly into the blocking so that the actors moved naturally from realistic moment to heightened memory. The music and singing seemed to grow effortlessly out of the world of the play and functioned as a natural progression from the moments in the play during which they occurred. The actors worked as an ensemble, listening to one another and responding in the moment to their scene partners. This cohesion made for an enjoyable performance for the audience and was an indicator of the successful collaboration of the director, design team, and cast.

The director set out to lead a collaborative production process and was ultimately successful. She prioritized inclusiveness and approached the production with an open mind to the ideas and preferences of everyone on the production team. Although there are opportunities for her to grow as a collaborative leader, she was ultimately successful in creating a positive collaborative environment. Production meetings and rehearsals ran smoothly and were positive experiences for everyone involved. No one felt their ideas were not valued, and everyone took ownership of the project and participated in making the production successful. Further evidence of the success of the director's collaborative approach can be seen in the tremendous growth of the young actors in the production.

Dancing at Lughnasa was the first mainstage production for many of the actors. Their success was contingent upon the director's with patience and empathetic disposition. Young actors are easily discouraged and need frequent affirmation. The director's collaborative approach lends itself naturally to encouragement and empathy. The actors were challenged, but were never made to feel inferior. Because they did not have any fear of shaming from the director, they were empowered to ask questions and make brave choices onstage. The director was sensitive to the needs of the individual actors, noticing the tone and type of notes to which each actor was most receptive, and making adjustments to her communication style to accommodate them. She took time outside of rehearsal to work with individual actors to ensure their needs were met and that they were able to do their best work onstage. Over the course of the rehearsal process, the director cultivated tremendous growth in each actor, ultimately resulting in an overall successful production.

Assurance of a job well done transforms the process of identifying opportunities for improvement into an exercise in encouragement. As the director works toward future projects, she is encouraged to improve her performance in the areas of casting, time management, and leadership.

Casting

The director faced substantial challenges as a result of poor casting choices. At auditions, the director was inhibited by her background as an educator. She approached casting from the perspective of a teacher wanting to provide opportunities for students rather than as a director looking for the most highly skilled actors. In some cases, the director mistook an actor's enthusiasm to work on a role for the actual ability and skill set needed to perform the role well. Faculty feedback reinforced the director's instinct that she had missed the mark in casting the roles of Kate, Gerry, and Michael. While each actor in the cast grew stronger over the course of the rehearsal period, these actors simply were not ready for the roles in which they were cast.

The actress cast as Kate struggled throughout the process to move from an intellectual understanding of the role, for which she was cast, to an authentic performance. The actor cast as Gerry was unable to master the challenging Welsh dialect, and was unable to focus his attention on improving his acting. He was further just not the best fit for the role. The character requires an actor who exudes a sense of magnetism and danger. The actor came across on stage as stiff and uncertain. Finally, the actor cast as Michael was too young and inexperienced for such a demanding role. He was cast for his approachability and childlike characteristics, which resembled Michael. The director

should have cast a more experienced, more mature actor who could carry the show with less difficulty.

The director is encouraged to take steps to ensure she selects the right actor for each role in future productions. She is encouraged to approach casting with a more critical eye and to resist the urge to make casting choices based on perceived potential. It is a common trap for directors to misidentify the actor who embodies the character or who can speak intelligently about the character, as the best actor for the role. In both cases, the production suffers from a poor directorial choice that cannot be truly rectified without recasting altogether. The director must work to focus on the performance given at auditions and not allow herself to make casting decisions based on her perception of an actor's potential for growth.

Time Management

The director's greatest strength in the rehearsal room is her empathy for the actor. Collaborative work is best done when a group of individuals are committed to a team mentality. Consequently, empathy is a must in any collaborative endeavor. But over the course of this production, the director discovered that her greatest strength was also her greatest weakness. The director found herself more concerned with caring for the actors than with being faithful to the play. This resulted in many rehearsal hours spent tolerating insufficient acting choices and waiting for actors to arrive at stronger choices on their own. One professor observed that there were moments in the performance when the dramatic action was not clearly played. This problem can be traced to the director's insufficient management of rehearsal time. Further, the director's decision to schedule blocking rehearsals out of order created unnecessary confusion and ultimately led to a

good deal of wasted time. Had the director made more efficacious use of the first two weeks of rehearsal, the last four weeks of rehearsal, which did reflect tremendous growth, would have been less stressful and more productive.

The director is encouraged to plan for more efficient use of rehearsal time. The limited time available for any production necessitates that the director use time actively and wisely. The director is encouraged to raise her expectations of actors during early rehearsals when the cast is still on book. As her faculty mentor pointed out, demanding that actors make appropriate acting choices in the early phases of rehearsal will reduce stress levels in later rehearsals. Finally, the director is encouraged to be proactive in finding solutions to problems as soon as she becomes aware of them. Being sensitive to potential problems before they occur is a vital skill for any leader. This is particularly germane to the director's work with the design and technical team. With improved time management, the director's leadership will also improve.

Leadership

The director's approach to the leadership of this production was complicated because of unclear authoritative boundaries. Although the director is the ultimate authority in any professional production, educational theatre carries with it an inherent hierarchy that does not always place the director at the top. When the director is a student and faculty and/or staff members are part of the production team, there can be confusion over who has the final authority in decision-making. This unclear hierarchy existed during the production of *Dancing at Lughnasa*. While these cultural conditions were beyond the control of any member of the production team, they did have an impact on the director's efficacy as a leader. The director's collaborative approach, while not inherently

wrong, did nothing to instill confidence in the production team that she was a capable leader.

At the beginning of the production process, the director's means of establishing a collaborative environment negatively impacted her ability to lead the production team. Her manner of speaking and working was intended to be kind and considerate toward everyone involved; however, the director's attitude and actions were perceived by members of the production team as a lack of confidence. There were elements of the production that suffered from this dynamic. For example, when the director was not getting what she felt the production needed, she hesitated to question the production team about the execution of certain elements of the design. This hesitation caused a delay in the execution of design elements, such as the building of the tree. In some cases, this hesitation rendered correction impossible, as in the case of the hill and the masking of the audience safety railings. Furthermore, the director's gentle approach permitted designers and technicians to neglect several areas of the production. For example, all of the props should have been procured and used in rehearsal much sooner than tech week, but the director failed to provide hard deadlines to the props designer. Also, the stage management team was not diligent in communicating with each department outside of production meetings and rehearsal reports, so follow-up on requests was delayed or non-existent. The director failed to follow up on these requests herself or to question the stage management team about the results of these requests.

The director is encouraged to reevaluate her leadership style. She is especially encouraged to deny her impulses to self-deprecate, thereby belittling her own work. She should always avoid seeking approval from her design team at the expense of securing

what is best for the production. In future productions, the director must maintain close oversight of every aspect of the production. Additionally, she must prioritize the quality and authenticity of the production over keeping people happy and comfortable.

Conclusion

When *Dancing at Lughnasa* was selected as part of Baylor's mainstage season, the director was excited about leading a collaborative effort to tell Brian Friel's beautiful story. She eagerly anticipated delving into the memory play genre, and leading her cast to a deeper understanding of the play and their part in storytelling. She looked forward to crafting an experience that invited Baylor theatre patrons to examine their biases about place, family, and religion. Even more than this, the director was eager for the opportunity to develop her collaborative leadership style.

The director's performance was not perfect. Her mistakes, particularly in leadership, had negative consequences. However, the director did experience growth over the course of the process. She learned to trust the text and the actors to tell a story of emotional depth and meaning. She learned that poor casting choices cannot be overcome by any amount of coaching. She discovered that having high expectations for a cast does not prevent the actors from feeling their work is valued and should go hand-in-hand with leading a production. Finally, she learned that collaborative leadership should begin with confident strength and be characterized by attention to detail at every level of the production. These lessons are the true measure of this director's success in the production of *Dancing at Lughnasa*.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Plays by Brian Friel

Table A.1. Original plays by Brian Friel, 1958-1979.

Title	First Production	Publication
<i>A Sort of Freedom</i> (Radio Play)	Northern Ireland Home Service, 1958	(unpublished)
<i>To This Hard House</i> (Radio Play)	Northern Ireland Home Service, 1958	(unpublished)
<i>A Doubtful Paradise</i>	Group Theatre, Belfast, 1960	(unpublished)
<i>The Enemy Within</i>	Abbey Theatre, Dublin, 1962	Dublin, Gallery Press, 1979
<i>The Blind Mice</i>	Eblana Theatre, Dublin, 1963	(unpublished)
<i>Philadelphia, Here I Come!</i>	Gaiety Theatre, Dublin, 1964	London, Faber and Faber, 1965
<i>The Loves of Cass McGuire</i>	Helen Hayes Theater, New York, 1966	London, Faber and Faber, 1967
<i>Lovers</i>	Gate Theatre, Dublin, 1967	London, Faber and Faber, 1969
<i>Crystal and Fox</i>	Gaiety Theatre, Dublin, 1968	London, Faber and Faber, 1970
<i>The Mundy Scheme</i>	Olympia Theatre, Dublin, 1969	London, Faber and Faber, 1970
<i>The Gentle Island</i>	Olympia Theatre, Dublin, 1971	London, Davis-Poynter, 1973
<i>The Freedom of the City</i>	Royal Court Theatre, London, 1973	London, Faber and Faber, 1974
<i>Volunteers</i>	Abbey Theatre, Dublin, 1975	London, Faber and Faber, 1979
<i>Living Quarters</i>	Abbey Theatre, Dublin, 1977	London, Faber and Faber, 1978
<i>Aristocrats</i>	Abbey Theatre, Dublin, 1979	Dublin, Gallery Press, 1980
<i>Faith Healer</i>	Longacre Theater, New York, 1979	London, Faber and Faber, 1980

Table A.2. Original plays by Brian Friel, 1980-2005

Title	First Production	Publication
<i>Translations</i>	Field Day Theatre Company, Derry, 1980	London, Faber and Faber, 1981
<i>American Welcome</i> (One-Act)	Actor's Theatre of Louisville, KY, 1980	in <i>Best Short Plays 1981</i> , Chilton, Radnor, Pennsylvania, 1981
<i>The Communication Cord</i>	Field Day Theatre Company, Derry, 1982	London, Faber and Faber, 1983
<i>Making History</i>	Field Day Theatre Company, Derry, 1988	London, Faber and Faber, 1989
<i>Dancing at Lughnasa</i>	Abbey Theatre, Dublin, 1990	London, Faber and Faber, 1990
<i>Wonderful Tennessee</i>	Abbey Theatre, Dublin, 1993	Dublin, Gallery Press, 1993
<i>Molly Sweeney</i>	Gate Theatre, Dublin, 1994	Dublin, Gallery Press, 1994
<i>Give Me Your Answer, Do!</i>	Abbey Theatre, Dublin, 1997	Dublin, Gallery Press, 1997
<i>Afterplay</i> (One-Act)	Gate Theatre, Dublin, 2002	Dublin, Gallery Press, 2002
<i>Performances</i>	Gate Theatre, Dublin, 2003	Dublin, Gallery Press, 2003
<i>The Home Place</i>	Gate Theatre, Dublin, 2005	London, Faber and Faber, 2005

Table A.3. Adaptations by Brian Friel.

Title	First Production	Publication
<i>Three Sisters</i> (After Chekhov)	Field Day Theatre Company, Derry, 1981	Dublin, Gallery Press, 1981
<i>Fathers and Sons</i> (After Turgenev)	Royal National Theatre, London, 1987	London, Faber and Faber, 1987
<i>A Month in the Country</i> (After Turgenev)	Gate Theatre, Dublin, 1992	Dublin, Gallery Press, 1992
<i>The London Vertigo</i> (After Charles Macklin)	Gate Theatre, Dublin, 1992	Dublin, Gallery Press, 1990
<i>Uncle Vanya</i> (After Chekhov)	Gate Theatre, Dublin, 1998	Dublin, Gallery Press, 1998
<i>The Yalta Game</i> (One-Act from Chekhov's 'Lady with Lapdog')	Gate Theatre, Dublin, 2001	Dublin, Gallery Press, 2001
<i>The Bear</i> (One-Act after Chekhov)	Gate Theatre, Dublin, 2002	Dublin, Gallery Press, 2002
<i>Hedda Gabler</i> (After Ibsen)	Gate Theatre, Dublin, 2008	Dublin, Gallery Press, 2008

APPENDIX B

Design Images



Figure B.1. The Mabee theatre.

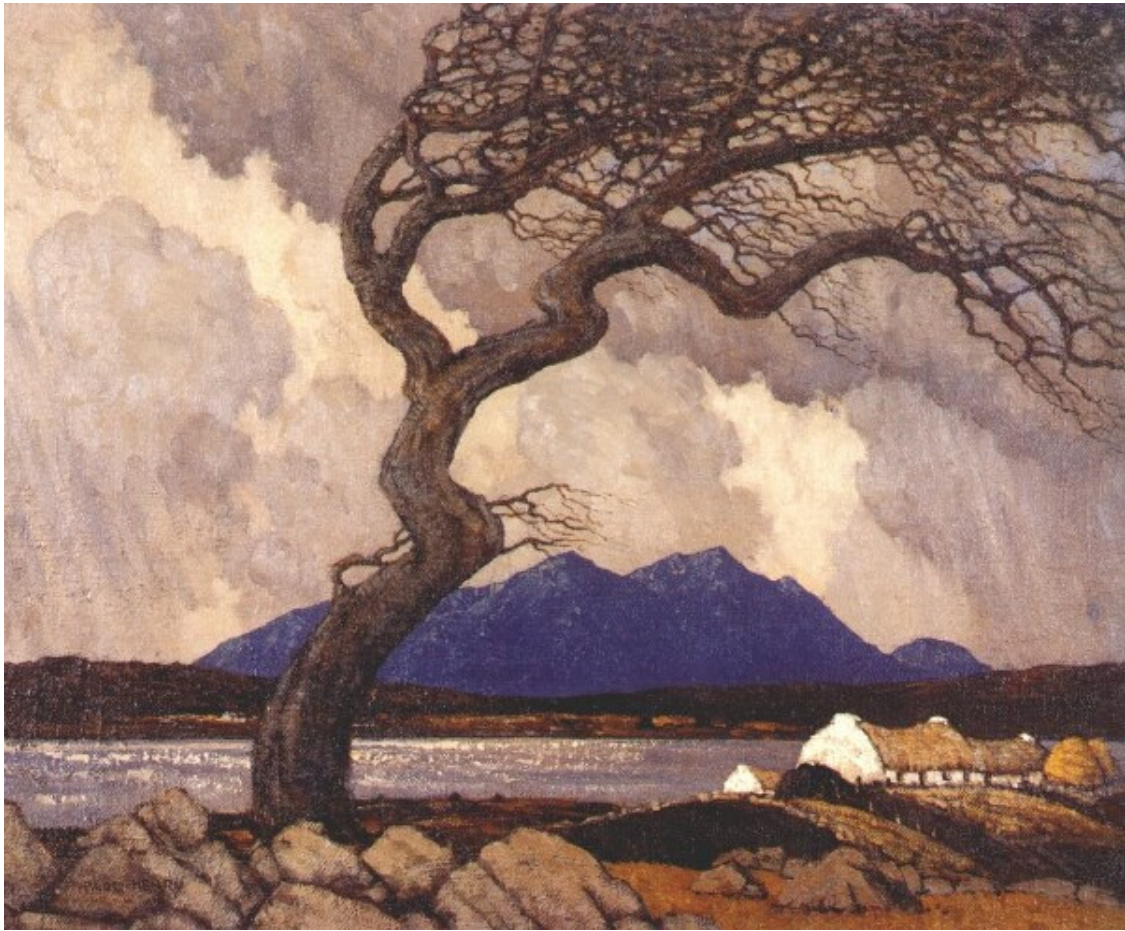


Figure B.2. *The Fairy Thorn* by Paul Henry.



Figure B.3. Preliminary scenic design sketch.



Figure B.4. Set model.



Figure B.5. Completed set.



Figure B.6. Kate's act one costume.



Figure B.7. Kate's act two costume.



Figure B.8. Maggie's act one costume.



Figure B.9. Agnes's act one costume.



Figure B.10. Agnes's act two costume.



Figure B.11. Rose's act one costume.



Figure B.12. Rose's act two costume.



Figure B.13. Chris's act one costume.



Figure B.14. Chris's act two costume.

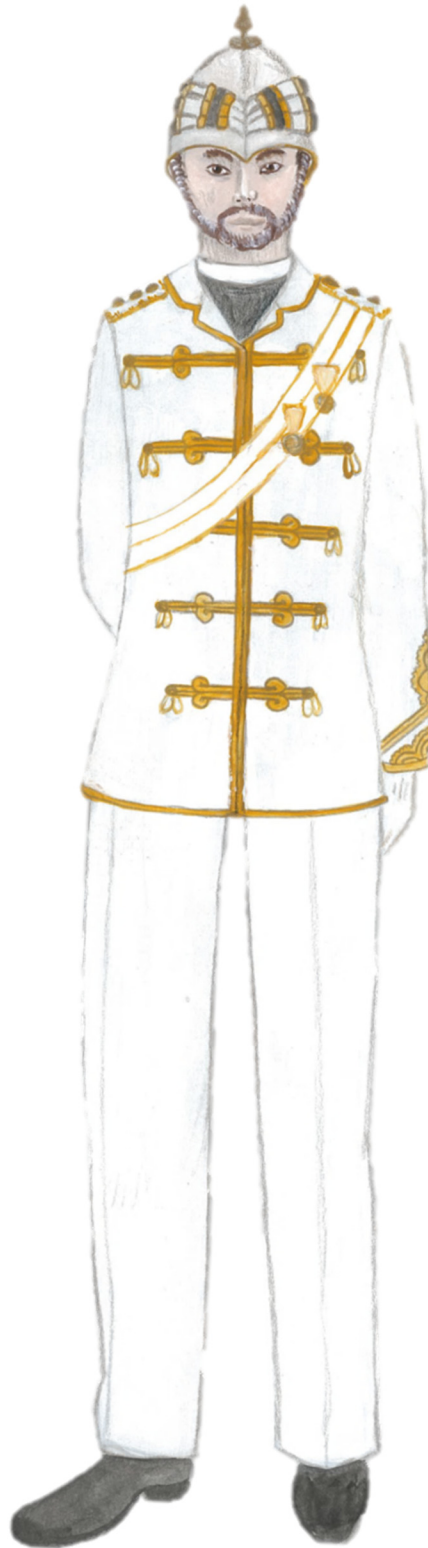


Figure B.15. Father Jack's uniform.



Figure B.16. Father Jack's act one costume.



Figure B.17. Father Jack's act two costume.



Figure B.18. Gerry's act one costume.



Figure B.19. Gerry's act two costume.



Figure B.20. Michael's costume.



Figure B.21. Opening tableau.

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