



Dancing at Lughnasa by Brian Friel, Gate Theatre

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Author(s)	Lonergan, Patrick
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Gate Theatre, Dublin

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Dancing at Lughnasa premiered at the Abbey in 1990, and was produced in Dublin during five of the ten subsequent years – using the same director and designer every time. Our understanding of the play has therefore been conditioned to an unusual extent by people other than Brian Friel – by Joe Vanek, whose design has now become iconic, and by Patrick Mason, whose direction is regarded by some as an inspiring highpoint of recent Irish theatre, but by others as a sentimentalised betrayal of Friel's text. This over-familiarity, combined with the 1997 film version of *Lughnasa* – and the impact of *Riverdance* on our perception of the play's famous dance scene – has blunted its impact considerably.

The value of this production, directed by Joe Dowling, is that it makes *Lughnasa* strange again. The Abbey premiere opened with music, its cast in tableaux against an expansive set that was lit in a soft autumnal haze. Here we open with a darkened stage, the gloom of Rupert Murray's lighting creating a sense of familial warmth being threatened by an uncertain future. Robert Jones' set emphasises the Mundys' isolation: the interior of their cottage is initially closed to us; beside it, a grass footpath disappears upwards, looking something like a prison wall. The only sound we hear is the voice of Peter Gowen who, as the play's narrator Michael, stands in a severe spotlight that underscores his distance from the action. His opening monologue is delivered

with a disconcerting, arrhythmic speed that disorientates the audience, stopping us from settling into the play. These characteristics – gloom, isolation, and urgency – dominate the unfolding action.

Almost every performance deepens our understanding of Friel's characters. Although Ben Price as Gerry is disappointing, often ill-at-ease while singing and dancing, the rest of the cast are excellent. Maggie's humour can dominate the play, but Dearbhla Crotty confidently holds back, allowing other aspects of her character to surface. John Kavanagh's Jack is mischievous but dignified: we understand why his sisters look up to him – and why they're frightened by him. Catherine Walsh's Agnes is bursting with suppressed energy, so that her departure now seems tragically inevitable. And Aisling O'Neill nicely draws out Chris's vulnerability and propensity to depression.

The two strongest performances come from Dawn Bradfield and Andrea Irvine. Bradfield's characterisation of Rose is so complete that she dominates the play, especially when she's not talking. And Irvine brilliantly humanises Kate, playing her lines without irony, so that her character now occupies the emotional core of the drama.

A problem arises with the presentation of Michael however. Friel places different elements of the drama into tension with each other throughout *Lughnasa*. Movement competes with language, the religious with the secular, tradition with modernity, memory with forgetting. The play is disturbing precisely because it leaves these tensions mostly unresolved. The most

important tension is between what Michael tells us and what Friel shows us. For example, Michael claims that we'll see a marriage ceremony in the second act, but Friel instead gives us a ceremony of leave-taking. Michael isn't just an unreliable narrator: Friel constantly emphasises that he is "narrating" memories that he couldn't possibly possess. The characters often draw attention to Michael's absence from the action, much of which happens in different places simultaneously. And even if Michael had witnessed these events, it's unlikely that, as a seven-year old boy, he would have understood them.

So any director of *Lughnasa* needs to work out how to present the tension between Michael's memories, and the action on stage. One solution is to present the two stories as independent of each other – the Mundys' story as one "reality" that contrasts with the separate reality of the narrator. Another is to portray the action not as memory, but as fiction – as Michael's attempts to come to terms imaginatively with things that he'll never know with certainty. For this production, Dowling seems to have chosen to present *Lughnasa* as a straightforward memory play: he has Michael relate emotionally to the action, and even brings him onstage for the dance scene (Friel's script emphasises that Michael wasn't there). And, significantly, the spotlight lingers on Michael long after the lights have gone down on everyone else: whereas Patrick Mason's original production led audiences to think of *Lughnasa* as being about a middle-aged man's nostalgia, here we're being told that the play is about a middle-aged man's sense of loss. In both cases, the masculine aspects of the play are being given too much weight. So although Gowen

does his job well – and although his performance seems to be motivated by a need to remind audiences of *Lughnasa's* tragic aspects – Michael is unbalancing the play.

It would, however, be wrong to over-emphasise one flaw in an excellent production – in which Dowling and his cast persuasively show how much can be gained from continuing to explore Friel's troubling – and great – play.