

DECLAN HUGHES *THE LAST SUMMER*

No-one knew it at the time, but 1991 was the year when everything began to change in Irish theatre. Here at the Gate, the first Beckett Festival was bringing international performers, directors and scholars together in an attempt to re-imagine Beckett as an Irish dramatist – something that we now take for granted. Over at the Abbey, the newly appointed Artistic Director Garry Hynes was generating huge controversy with a radical new version of *The Plough and the Stars* – a production that paved the way for the subsequent Irish engagement with European ideas about theatre. Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* had just transferred to London, where it would become the first of a series of Irish hits on the world stage. And at the Project Arts Centre, in the slowly regenerating Temple Bar area, a new play by Declan Hughes called *Digging for Fire* was being performed by the exciting young company Rough Magic.

On the surface, *Digging for Fire* might seem like many other Irish plays: emigration is a major theme, plenty of alcohol is consumed and, somewhat like Friel's *Lughnasa*, the play's emotional high-point involves a woman dancing alone. But in countless ways Hughes was doing things that had never been done before. His characters were citizens not just of Ireland but of the world: they spoke about London and New York as if those places were more familiar to the audience than Synge's Aran Islands or Friel's Ballybeg. And then there was the brilliant music: the play takes its title from a song by the Boston alternative rock group Pixies, concludes with a song by New Order, and featured Tom Waits, REM, and many others.

What was exciting about *Digging for Fire* was that, where so many Irish plays are set in idealised rural idylls or rundown urban dystopias, Hughes gave his audience a Dublin they could recognise; he portrayed people whose tastes and language were just like our own. It's for this reason that so many people who came of age in the late 1980s and early 1990s (myself included) will tell you that their lifelong interest in theatre began when they saw *Digging for Fire*.

Hughes would later articulate the ideas that inspired his work in a brilliant essay called "Who The Hell Do We Still Think We Are?" in which he calls for an Irish drama that would dispense with tradition and focus instead on the real world. Why, he wondered, do so many Irish writers "persist in defining ourselves by the ethnic, the pastoral... Even if we do it in an iconoclastic way, the iconography remains powerfully the same: half door, pint bottle, sacred heart". Expressing impatience with the multitude of Irish plays set in a country kitchen, Hughes wondered if the lure of international success was having too forceful an impact on new Irish writing: "The rest of the world colludes in this [style of writing] because they want us to be Irish too" he wrote. "Hell, they'd like to be Irish themselves."

That tension between international success and ordinary Irish life lies at the heart of another important Hughes play, the 2003 drama *Shiver*. Here, he focuses on two couples who are struggling to make sense of their lives in Celtic Tiger Dublin: they have money but lack values, and their sense of Irishness is being challenged by newly evident class divisions and the arrival of multiculturalism. Their predicament was brilliantly encapsulated by one of Hughes's characters. "Well you see," she drawls, drunkenly, "we've had enough of dead mummies and peeling potatoes and farms and

bogs and fucking . . . all that old tweedy fucking . . .” And she trails off, searching for the right words. “Seamus Heaney is made of tweed,” she concludes.

In performance, those lines were marvellously iconoclastic, but they also revealed a truth about Celtic Tiger Ireland: in our haste to be rid of the past, we had lost the ability to imagine possible futures for ourselves. *Shiver* warned us that enrichment was making Ireland vacuous, vulgar and self-important, and it predicted (accurately, of course) that the Celtic Tiger would come to a sorry end. If, as Hughes contends, too many Irish dramatists are obsessed with the past, *Shiver* showed that the best theatre has the capacity to anticipate – and thus to warn us about – the future.

The Last Summer builds on those earlier achievements. It too is a play that considers Irish life in the context of events in the wider world. With its focus on social class, its offstage brawl between rival Irish families, and its several ‘conversations on a homecoming’, this is a play that draws heavily on the legacies of Tom Murphy. Yet it is also fully conversant with international – and especially American – culture, most interestingly in its exploration of Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. That novel, let’s remember, attacks “careless people . . . who smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made...” Hughes thus takes Fitzgerald’s epitaph for the Jazz Age and applies it to the Celtic Tiger.

In blurring the distinction between past and present – between Ireland in the 2000s and America in the 1920s – Hughes shows us something about ourselves that is simultaneously hopeful and humbling: the Irish situation, painful as it is, is not unique. We may leave the theatre uncertain of whether the Ireland of 2007 was more advanced than the Ireland of 1977 – but it’s important to note that this play is actually about two ‘last’ summers: the end of adolescence and the end of the Celtic Tiger. Hughes thus reveals that what might seem like a conclusion is often the start of something new. As one of his characters says, “Maybe we all come back around. Not the way we expected, or hoped. But sooner or later, we all come back.”