

Berwick Educational Association

Introduction to Irish Drama: The Plays of Brian Friel

A lecture by Dr Richard Moore
Friday 6th April 2018 10am -1.00pm
Berwick Voluntary Centre,
Tweed St, Berwick



Brian Friel: what is it that makes him special? Why too does he seem appropriate for putting our toe in the vast riches of Irish dramatist waters? Perhaps one reason is that his work fulfils two key criteria. First, like most great art, it takes the particular and makes it universal. It gives it timeless and general relevance – it strikes a lasting chord. Second, it is rich in possibilities, in shading and in nuance. It never descends from the picture to the diagram or moves from the individual to the category. It shows life in all its complexity, reaching beyond the tools of the propagandist to the vision of the humane philosopher.

Brian Friel is an Ulsterman. He was born in Killyclogher, close to the town of Omagh in Country Tyrone in January, 1929. He claims, “I have two birth certificates, one which says my birthday falls on January 9th, another which favours January 10th. Perhaps I’m twins.” Actually, a sense of duality, of personal division is a theme explored in some of his works. In his introduction to *Philadelphia, Here I Come*, he goes on to tell us that although he is known as Brian, he was baptised Bernard. Perhaps the change to Brian reflects a concern with Catholic values. The Friels were a Catholic family living in a Protestant constituency. Brian is a Gaelic form. Bernard is an Anglicised variant.

The two plays we are going to examine are *Translations* and *Dancing at Lughnasa*. The first is a three-act piece written in 1980. It is set in Baile Beag (Ballybeg), a name roughly meaning small town, though referring more precisely to a fictional Donegal village in 19th century agricultural Ireland. Friel has said that *Translations* is "a play about language and only about language", but it deals with a wide range of issues, stretching from language and communication to Irish history and cultural imperialism. Friel responds strongly to both political and language questions in modern-day Northern Ireland.

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He said that his play "should have been written in Irish", but, despite this fact, he crafted carefully the verbal action in English which makes the dynamics of the play come alive. The play is full of humanity, most notably in a moving scene where an Irish-speaking woman and an English speaking British soldier express their love simply through naming places that are known and dear to them. Given that the British are in the process of anglicising Irish place-names – and that the soldier is part of the process- this has particular poignancy.

Dancing at Lughnasa is just as rich. In some ways it is even more painful while also containing much intermittent humour. The play was first performed at the Abbey Theatre, in April, 1990, and returns us to Ballybeg and to a family drama and memories of childhood. Friel here draws on his own family history but also on his own experience of false memory. Relevant to the history is the fact that two of Friel's aunts endured a life of destitution in London after leaving the family home. As a young man, he searched for them, finding one in a hostel for the homeless where he learnt of their suffering. In the narrated parts of the play Friel refers to the fate of the two aunts. This casts a long shadow over the recollections of the main character's seemingly rather delightful summer.

The full significance of false memory syndrome and indeed of the Festival of Lughnasa will be made clear during the study morning. But what we should most take away from it is a sense of the playwright's humanity. It is worth remembering that the decades during which he lived in Northern Ireland were full of political tension and sectarian violence. His was a voice of moderation and indeed he often likened the province to a strife-riven family. The nation as a family, he feels, has long been distressed by tribal conflict of one kind or another, and the legacy of colonisation has added further schisms. Given all this, it is not surprising that emigration, whether by choice or necessity, is one of his key themes. But Friel always sees more than one side to a question and is never strident in proclaiming his social and political beliefs. He is man for all men (and women) - a man for all seasons. Getting to know him is a humbling and enriching experience.

The cost of the lecture is £9. [To book online please click here](#)

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(Irish Drama)