CITATION FOR BRIAN FRIEL, ULYSSES MEDAL, UCD, JUNE 16 2009

President, Registrar, Honoured Conferees, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

How much the plays of Brian Friel have meant to me, personally and professionally, will I hope be apparent in the following remarks. But I feel strongly that I am also standing here on behalf of the many colleagues in the School of English, Drama and Film, the School of Music and the School of Classics who have written about the work and the wider UCD community in whose memories and affections the plays are lodged. For in honouring Brian Friel with the Ulysses medal, University College Dublin is honoring fifty years of achievement by a man who has been acknowledged as not only Ireland's greatest living playwright but one of the world's greatest. For at least once in each decade of his writing career, a play by Brian Friel has gone from success in his own country to triumph abroad. *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* followed its breakthrough production by the Gate Theatre at the 1964 Dublin Theatre Festival with a nine-month run on Broadway and a lengthy US tour. In 1989, nine years after its inaugural run at the Abbey Theatre, his Chekhovian play *Aristocrats* broke through to major runs and awards on both the London and New York stages. *Translations*, the first play he wrote for the Field Day Theatre Company which he co-founded, was memorably staged in 1980 at Derry's Guild Hall; it went on to tour Ireland north and south and was subsequently presented in London, the first Irish play to enter the National Theatre repertory there since O'Casey. 1990's *Dancing at Lughnasa* gathered an irresistible momentum in its Abbey Theatre premiere which carried it on to awards in London and New York. Brian Friel's mantelpiece must be groaning with the weight of Tony, Olivier and other awards for his plays, most recently the *Evening Standard* Best Play of 2005 for the Gate's production of *The Home Place*. No other contemporary Irish playwright has had such international acclaim; no other has written plays whose situations and characters have translated so readily to other cultural and political contexts. Friel's international success has not been achieved at the expense of but in harmony with his status and popularity at home. Audiences here understand his plays more completely not only because they are more intimate with the life depicted in them but because they have seen all twenty-three original plays and the adaptations from Chekhov and Turgenev. Irish audiences have gone on from the emigration of Gar O'Donnell to confront the disillusioning return home of the seventy-year old Cass McGuire; they have identified with the resonances of Bloody Sunday and the Widgery Tribunal in 1973's *The Freedom of the City*; they were first to respond to the bravery of 1979's *Faith Healer*, after it had failed on Broadway; and they have seen not only *Translations* but *Communication Cord*, *Making History* and important plays by other Irish writers collectively signal the intervention of the Field Day Theatre Company in the politics of the North. Irish audiences can most fully attest to the truth of Seamus Heaney's perception that Brian Friel's constant renewal of his dramatic art is a profound record of 'what it has been like to live through the second half of the twentieth century in Ireland'.

Two of the most courageous decisions Friel ever made were the decision to give up teaching and the decision to dedicate himself to playwriting. Born as he put it himself 'a member of the minority living in the North', he moved at the age of ten from Omagh to Derry where he was to grow up and become a teacher, like his father before him. In 1960, at the age of thirty-one, he gave up teaching to become a full-time writer, a brave decision for a married man with a growing family. The decision must have been helped by the fact that he had a contract with *The New Yorker* for the short stories he was writing at the time. Then some years after that he gave up writing short stories to concentrate solely on drama. This may have been encouraged by the US success of *Philadelphia* but it was still an incredibly risky move, since a successful play can often be followed by a commercial failure, as Friel was to experience on more than one occasion. Encouraged by the director Tyrone Guthrie, Friel sensed he had it within him to become a distinctively original and groundbreaking Irish playwright. The Friel archive in the National Library in Dublin is a detailed and painstaking record of what he invested in that belief: the numerous versions of the plays, written and rewritten through draft after draft, as incisions are made with the meticulous scalpel of his pen into what would seem perfectly fine lines of dialogue and even better suggestions superimposed. Each play is written with a high ambition, a self-questioning perfectionism, a ceaseless experimentation and determination to break new ground. That experimentation, which leads him to follow a tragedy with a farce, a history play with a play about the present, also shows a stubborn persistence with certain themes: above all the need to work out the competing claims of tradition and modernity in an Irish context. Almost all of Friel's plays are set, not in the metropolitan centres of Belfast and Dublin, but in his self-invented Ballybeg, Baile Beag or 'small town', in his mother's home place of County Donegal. The politics are mostly refracted through a number of families in the marginalized community of that small town; but like the great plays of the Greek tragedians they tell the whole story in revelatory microcosm. We are a different people and this country a more self-aware and assured place because in and through the plays of Brian Friel our experience has been – in the dying words of Lily in *TheFreedom of the City* – 'isolated, and assessed, and articulated'.

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