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**The Art of Popular Culture: From  
'The Meeting of the Waters' to  
*Riverdance***

**Series Editor: P.J. Mathews**

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## Frank McGuinness

### Filming Friel: *Lughnasa* on Screen

Many years ago the magazine, *The New Statesman*, in one of its weekly literary competitions asked for the most unlikely combinations to rival a recent publication which was entitled *Jane Austen and the French Revolution*. The winning entrant imagined a possible tome entitled *Irish Murdoch and the Music Hall Tradition*, envisaging the young Iris at Oxford taking time off her philosophic inquiries to revel in a knees-up with the likes of cheeky chappy Max Miller and a sing-along with the Cockney ghost of Marie Lloyd. I mention this because in certain respects this strange association of the novelist and the entertainment is as likely as Brian Friel and film.

It might be instructive to remember now the name, the nickname, Friel has been saddled with by many in his army of admirers. That tag is of course, Master—the Master—a title he shares with Noel Coward, and that's about all he does share with him. It is a homage to Friel's pre-eminence in his field. He is now looked up to by at least two if not three generations of northern and southern Irish writers. His fierce political independence, his staunch artistic integrity, his determination to announce to the world of theatre that the author—not the actor, not the designer, emphatically, deliberately not the director—it is that author who is the 'onlie begetter' of theatrical originality. These qualities of independence, integrity and authorial isolation are held to be examples of what the artist—the true artist—can aspire to. And how different, how very different, to the life of the average scriptwriter.

In the world of film, money rules the roost. The passion is profit, the producer's word is law. The sheer cost of even the most simple movie is astronomical compared to all but the most lavish theatrical production. And if 'the play is the thing', as Shakespeare insists, then the picture is a thousand things, the responsibility of a thousand voices and visions all taking shape under the aegis of a directorial command, created technically by a camera, created mechanically by a camera, not by the creativity of a writer's intelligent imagination. It is fair to say that throughout his long career Friel has by and large chosen to reject this form of commerce. In the 60s a film of *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* did appear. I believe there are also surviving screenings of stage productions on RTÉ of *The Loves of Cass Maguire* and *Crystal and Fox*. A BBC documentary voiced by Seamus Deane in the 80s, interrupted Deane's lecture with some excerpts from the plays. There was also on RTÉ in the 1970s, a splendid adaptation of Friel's story, 'Mr Sing My Heart's Delight'. And then in the 90s comes the subject of this talk, the film of *Dancing At Lughnasa*, for which I did the adopted screenplay. These must all, in their own way, be counted as part of the Friel canon—perhaps not a large part, perhaps not a significant a part but they do stand as reminders that film and Friel are not entirely incompatible.

In January of 2009 Friel will be 80 years old. His position as the grand old man of Irish culture is deserved, and it is assured—even if he might quarrel with the application of 'the grand old man', the 'old' being the quarrelsome term. The awards and honours bestowed on him have been modestly and kindly accepted by this great writer. Any yet so deeply ingrained is the image of Friel the sage—the Saoi or wise shaman as Aosdána calls you when you stumble into advanced artistic life—so deeply ingrained is this image that it is sometimes hard—perhaps even impossible to remember and to assert how radical a writer the young Friel

was through the 60s and into the 70s up to forming the committee of Field Day in 1980. That committee consisted of Seamus Deane, Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin, David Hammond, Stephen Rea, and they were joined later by the other great Irish playwright, Thomas Kilroy. This of course led to the political recognition of *Translations* and its international reputation as one of the key plays of the 1980s. The role of Friel as primarily an investigator of the word, of verbal systems and failures—enchantingly realized in the clever misapprehensions of Maire and Yolland's love scene—this linguistic role was the most strongly stressed. Friel's experiments seemed to be confined to the linguistic, and yet this does not do justice to the liberties taken in his writing from *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* onward. The splitting of the atom in the duality of Gar Public and Private in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, the serious scrutiny of straight and gay sexualities in *The Gentle Island*, the defiant complex structural games of *Living Quarters* and *Volunteers*, the intense rage burning behind both *The Mundy Scheme* and *The Freedom of the City*, the blazing contempt that sides passionately, irreverently with the young opposing the old—all these mark the disquiet and in some cases the disgust of the maturing Friel—for if there is one heading that one could crudely label over the theatre of Friel as a young man, then it is a violent one. It is a violence of mind, a violence of manners, a violence against accepted norms of social behaviour, a violence against conventions, and a passionate desire to disturb the status quo that of course parallels the internal upheavals of form and content typical of the revolutions in style that disfigured so strikingly the musical and cinematic legacy of Britain, Europe and America in the 1960s and 1970s. Stephen Rea has said that in the composition of Field Day's board one great, and indeed liberating distinction between the younger Rea and the master Friel was the latter's deafness to the reality of rock music. Yes, it is inconceivable Friel writing a play such as Stoppard's recent *Rock and Roll*, but Friel was open to the wider revolutions in acting and writing, even, dare one say it, the revolutions in directing that deeply influenced all aspects of performance in all media of that revolutionary decade over forty years ago when Friel's sensibility and modern sensibility took shape.

It is not the purpose of this talk to pinpoint too accurately specific cinematic references in Friel's theatre—I will talk of a few. There is unquestionably a deep correspondence between the conflicting narratives of *Faith Healer* and Kurosawa's Japanese masterpiece, *Rashomon*. There are debts to popular culture in *The Gentle Island's* play within a play—the doctor's story neatly, ironically paraphrasing *The Nun's Story*. The deep influence of Tennessee Williams especially, Arthur Miller, William Inge and Thornton Wilder on the 1960s generation of Friel, Murphy, Leonard and Kilroy has never really been explained in detail to my knowledge, other than to observe the frequent use of narrators in Friel, and this is a direct borrowing from Williams and to a lesser extent Miller and Wilder. I do not have time here to do remote justice to the invaluable points of contact between these American playwrights, whose work was so brilliantly realized in so many films, and their Irish counterparts. I mention these in passing as an excuse for my own desire to adopt, and the liberties that I took when I threw caution to the wind and said, yes, I will, yes, attempt to turn *Dancing At Lughnasa* into a film.

One of the consequences of throwing caution to the wind is that sometimes, most times, the wind will throw the caution back at you. It takes a particular recklessness to catch it, look at it and then throw it away again, but what is art if it is not reckless? All adaptations depend on—I might be polite and call it, daring—but let us be blunt and call it what it really is: all adaptations depend on sheer bloody neck. Nobody in their right mind would tackle the anarchic madness of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. It takes a necessary form of lunacy to brave the sheer face of that impossible sierra *The Barbaric Comedies* of Valle Inclán. The shifts and twists, the riotously queer straight sexuality of Miss Julie—who with a titter of wit would steep themselves in its panic and passion? Well I have taken them all on—but I don't clap myself on the back for that because all those challenges fade in comparison to the threat presented by putting *Dancing At Lughnasa* on film—*Dancing at Lughnasa*, the single most successful Irish play of the late twentieth century. What possessed me to do it?

For a start it might be useful to look at Friel's own lengthy exploration of the process of adapting one medium to another. Let's tempt fate, let's call this an act of translation. In the play *Translations* Friel in effect seems to see one language as the strange shadow of another, each of them cast by different suns yet still belonging to the same cosmos, sharing unpredictable points of contact, observing at times opposite laws of order and perception. This can of course result in misleading impressions. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, that genius of contradiction, Miss Gwendolen Fairfax, a woman truly after her creator Wilde's mind, asserts that her first impressions of people are never wrong, merrily ignoring all evidence to the contrary. The first impression of the play *Dancing At Lughnasa*, dedicated as it is to the memory of those five brave Glenties women, might lead one to expect it is the females who create it, who are the sole, decisive creators. But on closer evidence, this is not really the case. The narrator, Michael, both as boy and as man brings the play into lyrical being with the subtle, beautiful articulation of the rhythms of his memories from the 1930s. He puts the play to rest with his elegy full of lost hope, abandoning the family to the darkness of this play and all plays' end. The god in the title, Lugh, he is masculine, and it is the males, Jack and Gerry, they arrive as catalysts from the big world of outside Ballybeg—they bring to the small town change, and shape to the drama. When Agnes and Rose dare to do a runner their future life is condensed into a single sorrowful story of their victimhood on the streets of England, scraping an existence, dying as miserably as any fallen woman in Victorian melodrama. The play *Dancing At Lughnasa* is male and the challenge of translating it into film lay in making as best as I could—making it a woman's movie. Did I do that?

The first major decision was to reduce as much as possible the narrator's role. This must mean a losing of the play's most obvious poetry—the artistic eye and ears of the mature Michael provides that poetry. But instead of his masterful monologue there must be another focus, another guide—and inevitably that focus, that guide would be the camera itself—and for the workings of that camera, I chose as metaphor an image from Friel's text itself. I chose to heighten its importance, and the detail that I chose is a cracked mirror, a cracked mirror where two of the sisters, beautiful Chrissie, funny Maggie can see themselves. The fragments of light would pick out, and pick up from details, the theatrical text in its new transformed life on camera. In that broken reflection they would perceive what they look like and how we would know them from the first. Friel has been called the last romantic. As a homage to that appellation I envisaged the women as being freed from the spell of that quintessential romantic heroine the Lady of Shallot, daring to let the glass break and still surviving, braving the curse, wearing out the bad luck by working, working, working. That was the emphasis I placed on their lives throughout the film—the energy, the necessity, the demands of work in the meaning of these women's lives. Images of the

women at work abound, working in the house, working on the land, cleaning, cooking, making a life for all out of next to nothing. This stands in contrast to the males—Fr Jack is ill from his sojourn in Africa, he returns to Ballybeg exhausted. Gerry is a charming shiftless character moving from job to job—travelling salesman, dancing master, Spanish Civil War recruit—jack of all trades, master of none, expert at abandoning women throughout Ireland and his native Wales. Michael is a boy not yet earning. It is therefore the women who must work. That insistent economic necessity, that struggle for financial survival, that links all scenes and sections of the movie and it allowed me to take the one great decision that separates the film from the play—and that is where the action's climatic, physically climatic, moment or event would occur. This is of course the dance itself.

In the play the dance occurs in Act I. In the film it happens very near the end. Theatre has one unimaginable luxury over film. In a play time is not money. A text on stage may last for as long as it requires with no extra cost to the production. Every minute on screen by comparison costs a fortune. The universal maxim of advice to all screen writers—keep it short, let the visuals do the talking—that piece of wisdom owes as much, owes everything to financial pressure rather than aesthetic inclination. The whole play of *Dancing At Lughnasa* lasts for over two and a half hours, the first act runs at well over 60 minutes. The dance therefore takes place approximately an hour into stage business, with more than another hour and an interval to go. For all its intense energy and ritual ferocity there is about the theatrical choreography a sense that this frantic movement is again part of the puppet master's expansive design, in harmony with the expansive vocabulary and syntax of the narrator's beautifully written, subtly self-admiring self-portrait—a quality inherent to all dramatic monologues. Reduce those monologues, remove them, and a different urgency must possess the plot.

The film's narrative must lead ultimately to the explosion of the dance. The dance is the last revelation of the women, the ultimate illumination of their relationship with, and opposed to, each other. In the play the women are ultimately defined by their failed contacts with men: Chris and Agnes obviously with Gerry, Rose with Danny Bradley, Maggie with Brian McGuinness, Kate with Austin. They are just as powerfully dependent on their bonds with Michael, as son, and Jack, as priest and brother. Placing the dance in Act I, as the play does, abandoning it at the mid-point of the action, this reinforces the continued lack of the sisters' self-determination. The film places it as their conclusion, and it gives them a flash of freedom to combine exclusively together, as women—they separate then as individuals, but always they sustain the excitement of their bodies' rhythms and deliberately, very deliberately, this dance excludes the men from the secret of their lives. Michael and Jack are left to watch them by the door, Gerry is helpless up the tree; this is the women's war dance and the victory is an assertion of strength that needs no formality of male address, no monologue to dignify it, it thrives through the cracked grace of the camera, capable of many foci, refusing to centre on a single unifying, male voice. Control is collective instead—the passion I wished to explore in the film, that passion is sisterly, not masterly.

I do not think it is an exaggeration to state that with this play Friel restored dance to the heart of Irish culture. If Noel Pearson's Abbey production, directed by Patrick Mason, took Broadway by storm by winning four Tonys, then even more significantly it is to *Dancing At Lughnasa* that we can look for the origins of *Riverdance*, that phenomenal financial and artistic success of the Celtic Tiger. And it was probably due to that Tiger that the film found the necessary finance to exist and to open out the action. This required populating the film with figures merely mentioned in the play's text. Vera McLaughlin, Sofia her daughter, Austin

the shopkeeper, Danny Bradley—they do make fleeting appearances to embody the society of Ballybeg as it affects the Mundy family. But in creating a cast for the film the strength of Friel's psychology shone through. The movie retained all the play's major characters with the exchange of adult Michael for child Michael. I say this just in case there is doubt, so I will assert that he does know what he's doing. And if I didn't, I feel I would hear about it. It is a mark of the respect he is held in the international community that the film attracted Meryl Streep, Hollywood's most distinguished actress, to play Kate. What was she like to work with? Wonderful, but I must resort here to *Faith Healer*—Friel's other great play—and simply say, 'that's another story'.