

Irish times

Michael Billington at the Lyttelton

IS Brian Friel the Irish Chekhov? He certainly wrests poetry from everyday life and, since Friel's latest play, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, imported to the Lyttelton from Dublin's Abbey Theatre, features five unfulfilled sisters, comparisons with the great Russian are inevitable. But watching this strange, haunting, powerful play, another work altogether came to mind: the *Bacchae* of Euripides.

Like Euripides, Friel presents us with a conflict between reason and passion. His title, significantly, is a reference to the Irish harvest festival named after the pagan god Lugh. Friel's narrator/hero, Michael, in fact, takes us back to the warm harvest days of August, 1936, when he was a seven-year-old child being brought up by his unmarried mother, Chris, and her four sisters in the family home in County Donegal. On one level, this is a touching memory-play about a group of Catholic women trapped by economic circumstance. On a much deeper level, it is about the undeniability of primitive, atavistic passion.

Dancing is throughout a key metaphor; and in the most extraordinary burst of ecstasy currently to be seen on the London stage, the five women at one point release their emotional and sexual repressions by dancing to a reel issuing from the radio. Kate, the prim, bread-winning teacher, the jokey man-

hungry Maggie, the spinsterish knitters Agnes and Rose and the husband-less Chris all suddenly whirl and career round the stage like possessed dervishes. It is a brilliant and moving image that expresses Friel's point that there are emotions that lie far beyond words.

What might simply have been a nostalgic play about growing up in rural Ireland becomes a study of the unquenchable passions that underlie Catholic propriety. Friel constantly reminds us that, beyond the sisters' kitchen, exists a world of pagan rituals. Underscoring the point, is the malaria-ridden brother Jack, home after 25 years as a missionary in a Ugandan leper-colony, where he has enthusiastically worshipped strange gods.

Friel's strength as a writer is that his universal themes emerge from a precise evocation of family life. You learn, for instance, a vast amount about the sisters from their reactions to the arrival of Michael's father — a charming Welsh flanneller. Chris gently twirls with him in the garden to the strains of *Dancing in the Dark*, Maggie gazes wistfully out of the window at a world of lost romance, while Agnes (who clearly adores the fly-by-night Welshman) ferociously knits and Kate puritanically buries herself in the paper. It is pure stage poetry, deeply revealing of character.

All five sisters are so good that one must name them individually: Catherine Byrne as the beautiful Chris, Rosaleen Linehan as the purse-lipped Kate, Anita Reeves as the sex-starved Maggie, Brid



Rosaleen Linehan (Kate) and Catherine Byrne (Chris)

Ni Neachtain as simple Rose and Brid Brennan as the shy Alice.

Gerard McSorley as Michael steers us through the narration without seeming oppressively omniscient. And, joining the cast since Dublin, are Stephen Dillane, very good as the nimble-footed Welshman, and Alec McCowen, who is astonishing as Jack. What I shall long remember about Mr McCowen as the muffled, dying priest, is his joy at learning that Chris has a love-child which in Uganda was a sign of good fortune. That one moment epitomises the over-riding theme of Mr Friel's moving play: the wisdom of acknowledging the passions that lie beneath the hard crust of religious orthodoxy.

Billington on Lughnasa

Clipped By:



ianharris

Sun, Jan 3, 2021