

# Daughters dancing in the dark

**Theatre**  
**Michael Coveney**  
on Brian Friel's  
incandescent play  
at Dublin's Abbey.

EIGHT sisters light up the Dublin skies. Chekhov's three, Cusack vintage, continuing triumphantly at the Gate, are now joined by Brian Friel's five in his absorbing, funny and deeply poetic new play at the Abbey, *Dancing at Lughnasa*.

Like Seamus Heaney, Friel has a vision of Ireland that transcends the present by studying the nation's past, its customs and, above all, its ambiguous and exemplary adoption of the English language. In Friel's case, the sense of creative nostalgia is centred on his stage village of Ballybeg, near Donegal, a microcosm of Irish history.

In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, we are two miles from the village in the kitchen and garden of the Mundy sisters. The year is 1936. A grown man, the narrator Michael (Gerard McSorley), mediates between the reflective present and the living past, when he inhabited this scenario as a seven-year-old boy.

His unmarried mother, Chris (Catherine Byrne), was the youngest of the five girls. His father, Gerry (Paul Herzberg), is a Welsh deceiver and gramophone salesman about to join the International Brigade in the

Spanish Civil War. The small community is related outwards by the arrival of the girls' brother, Jack (Barry McGovern), who has contracted malaria in Uganda and been repatriated by the Church after working in a leper colony for 25 years.

Friel holds these narrative tensions in a burning crucible, itself transfigured in a heat haze of memory, in order to examine what was, and remains, extraordinary in these apparently ordinary lives. Joe Vaneek's design extends to a shimmering field of ripe wheat, flecked with poppies, which heralds La Lughnasa, the ancient feast day of the pagan harvest god, Lugh.

Everyone drinks and dances at Lughnasa, and heathen ceremony impinges on a Catholic community. The eldest sister, Kate (Frances Tomelty), a national schoolteacher, represents defiance, while the slow, gawling Rose (Brid Ni Neachtain) is betrayed by a false promise. Jack is having to re-learn Christian language, but he has been changed irrevocably by his experience.

The theatrical animation of rich ideas and subtle resonances is superbly controlled in Patrick Mason's production. The characters are indeed dancing in the dark, as prompted by one of the songs emanating fitfully from the kitchen wireless. They erupt into concerted frenzy, Chris in Jack's surplice, Kate

with a series of complicated jig steps, when the magnificently life-enhancing Maggie of Anita Reeves casually smears her face in flour and allows the rhythms of a bewitching native reel to course through her limbs. The sisters are possessed by atavistic impulse and the stage sings, then blazes.

Poignancy is achieved in a conflict between real vitality and a memorial tone; this world changed and disintegrated. Rose and Agnes (the consoling Brid Brennan), are home-knitters of gloves, lose their jobs, go to England, die as vagrants, penniless and alcoholic. Michael tells us this, and how Jack died, too, without celebrating another Mass. But the action is completed, on a caesura, in the distant present. Lives lost in history have been given substance in art. The play, brilliantly constructed, is the most thoroughly enjoyable Friel has yet written.

Frustrated expectation also lies at the heart of *Carousel*, the great Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, skimpily directed by Stewart Trotter at the new West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds. Ingenuity on a low budget is one thing; cheapness of result another. When the dead anti-hero, the carousel barker Billy Bigelow, goes to heaven after an aborted robbery, and descends into the future to give advice to the graduating daughter he never knew on

earth, Robert Jones's bare, circular seaboard setting is invaded by white ruffled curtains, clown regalia and tatty all-white costumes. It's like being in a downmarket store — Woolworth's, say, or Littlewoods — the week before Christmas.

The performances are uniformly harsh and unsubtle, from Christopher Howard's sawn-off, chirpy Bob Geldof-ish Billy, a man whose violent streak is implausible, to Gail Mortley's colourless Julie Jordan and the campy chorus line beyond. But this soaring operatic score — tinnily reduced on invisible synthesizers, electric bass and percussion — is so replete with melody, finely phrased sentiment and, above all, subjunctive tenderness ('If I Loved You', 'When the Children Are Asleep') that I'd like to see a major revival one day.

No major revival is required, I fear, for Frederick Lonsdale whose last play, Kenneth Tynan said, resembled 'a dear old lady embarrassingly got up as Mistinguett'. Lonsdale's antepenultimate piece, *Another Love Story* (1943), has been plonked stiffly onstage at the Leicester Haymarket by Edward Fox, who also plays the A. E. Matthews role of a raffish portrait painter determined to wrest his ex-wife (Jill Bennett) from her boring new husband (Michael Medwin) during the course of a house-party where his daughter Molly is deserted by a ludicrous



Creative nostalgia: Catherine Byrne and Paul Herzberg at the Abbey.

American Frenchman (Patrick Fiery updating the Anton Walbrook gigolo role) bent on seducing his old girlfriend (Lalla Ward).

The whole thing is entirely inane, unrelieved by any of the high comedy qualities to which the writing tamely aspires. I enjoyed seeing Lalla Ward having her bottom smacked but only because it was the least she deserved. The rigidity of Mr Fox's facial sneer, one of the wonders of the age insofar as it does not interfere with his vocal timing, has now wormed its way down to his feet. He's become a complete rictus, and moves with the disciplined jerkiness of a man who has either filled his pants or suddenly contracted rheumatoid arthritis.

Basement room only for Temba's disappointing Glory!,

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PRESENTS



## Coveney on Lughnasa

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