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In Memoriam: Brian Friel 1929 to 2015

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A shadow of sadness was cast over the Dublin Theatre Festival by the unexpected passing of Irish playwright, Brian Friel at the age of eighty six on Friday at his home in Donegal. Venues across the city joined their voices to the chorus of tributes being paid both from home and abroad. On the Abbey stage Director of the Abbey Theatre, Fiach Mac Conghail, paid homage to his friend and colleague while at the Project Arts Centre the audience were united in a heartfelt round of applause to honour one of Ireland's greatest dramatists.

Given the canonical standing of many of his greatest works, including "Dancing at Lughnasa," "Philadelphia, Here I Come" and "Translations" to name but a few, it can be easy to forget that Friel was a radical long before he became part of the establishment. "Philadelphia, Here I Come," when first produced at the Gaiety Theatre in 1964, was a theatrical revelation that many believe started a revolution. In 1973, the politically charged "The Freedom of the City" tackled the Northern Ireland troubles the year after Bloody Sunday. In 1980, along with Stephen Rea, Friel founded the aspirational The Field Day Theatre Company, which premiered "Translations" in Derry. From this kernel Field Day would grow beyond theatre to include Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin, Seamus Deane and Tom Kilroy among others. But Friel was always a central driving force behind Field Day, shaping both the artistic and cultural landscape of Ireland, North and South, for years to come.

1990 saw the premiere of his best known play, "Dancing at Lughnasa" which won three Tony Awards as well as many other awards internationally. Often called the Irish Chekhov, Friel also adapted works by Chekhov, Turgenev and Ibsen and in 2006 was inducted into The American Theatre Hall of Fame.

Tributes have already been paid by politicians, writers and stars of stage and screen. But tributes are also being paid on street corners throughout Dublin, in back stage dressing rooms and in private by countless people for whom his work made such an impact without them ever having met him. Writing thirty plays over fifty years, Friel's contribution to Irish theatre is inestimable and his loss is, and will continue to be, keenly felt.

It's poignant that what many consider Friel's masterpiece, "Dancing at Lughnasa" will play at this year's Dublin Theatre Festival. Equally poignant, and fitting, is that it is a North and South, joint production by Dublin Theatre Festival and The Lyric Theatre, Belfast. Running at the Gaiety Theatre from October 6th till October 11th, this co-production celebrates the twenty fifth anniversary of "Dancing at Lughnasa's" first production at the Abbey Theatre in 1990.

'When I remember it, I think of it as dancing. Dancing with eyes half-closed because to open them would break the spell. Dancing as if language had surrendered to movement - as if this ritual, this wordless ceremony, was now the way to speak, to whisper private and sacred things, to be in touch with some otherness. Dancing as if the very heart of life and all its hopes might be found in those assuaging notes and those hushed rhythms and in those silent and hypnotic movements.'

From "Dancing at Lughnasa" by Brian Friel, 1929 -2015



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