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**The Production History and Reception of Brian Friel's
Dancing at Lughnasa in Irish and Czech Contexts**

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Key Words:

Brian Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Irish drama, Irish theatre, Irish drama in the Czech Republic, interpretation, critical acclaim

Klíčová slova:

Brian Friel, *Tanec na konci léta*, irské drama, irské divadlo, irské drama v České republice, interpretace, ohlasy kritiky

Thesis Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to compare the production history and reception of Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*, arguably one of his most famous and successful plays, in Irish and Czech contexts. Following its triumphant premiere at the Abbey Theatre in 1990 directed by Patrick Mason, the production transferred to London and Broadway, where it garnered further critical acclaim and several prestigious awards. The first Czech production, directed by Jan Burian, opened at Divadlo na Vinohradech in Prague in 1993, and over the course of the next twenty years it was staged another eight times on Czech professional – mostly regional stages.

The opening chapter of the thesis focuses on the analysis of *Dancing at Lughnasa* using the method of close reading, as well as consulting secondary literature. The following chapter is divided into two parts, the first of them attempting to outline the background of the play by focusing on the events of the 1930s in Ireland. The second part is concerned with the context of writing *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Chapters four and five comprise the main body of the thesis and deal with the description of the five most significant productions in Ireland and the Czech Republic. These chapters focus on the context, the directors' concept, the acting and the critical acclaim. The last chapter concentrates on comparing the most significant Irish and Czech productions as well as clarifying the issue of the play's popularity. The approaches towards *Dancing at Lughnasa* in the Czech Republic are also touched upon. The immense popularity of this play on Czech stages is often explained by the fact that it offers five interesting roles for women. This thesis would like to ascertain whether this fact has always been the main source of motivation for the theatre practitioners to stage *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Another question this thesis examines is whether the interpretation of the play by most Czech directors, namely the simplification of Friel's text, may have prevented a Czech audience from experiencing the play fully.

Abstrakt

Cílem diplomové práce je porovnat irskou a českou inscenační praxi a recepci hry Briana Friela *Dancing at Lughnasa / Tanec na konci léta*, nepochybně jedné z jeho nejslavnějších a nejúspěšnějších her. Po více než zdařilé premiéře hry v Abbey Theatre v Dublinu (1990), byla tato inscenace Patricka Masona přenesena do Londýna a na Broadway, kde získala další uznání kritiky, oblibu diváků a několik prestižních ocenění. První česká inscenace v režii Jana Buriana byla uvedena v Divadle na Vinohradech roku 1993 a během následujících dvaceti let se hra dočkala dalších osmi profesionálních inscenací v českých, nejčastěji regionálních divadlech.

Úvodní kapitola analyzuje hru *Tanec na konci léta* pomocí metody close reading, dále též vychází ze sekundární literatury. Následující kapitola se věnuje kontextu a je rozdělena do dvou částí. První z nich nastiňuje historický kontext, do kterého je děj hry zasazen. Soustředí se tedy především na události roku 1936 v Irsku i ve světě. Druhá část se zabývá kontextem, ve kterém byla hra *Tanec na konci léta* napsána. Čtvrtá a pátá kapitola tvoří hlavní část diplomové práce. Tyto kapitoly jsou zaměřeny na popis pěti nejvýznamnějších inscenací v Irsku a v České republice. Inscenace jsou analyzovány z hlediska kontextu, ve kterém vznikaly, režiséřského záměru, herectví a ohlasů kritiky. Poslední kapitola porovnává nejvýznamnější irské a české inscenace a snaží se objasnit, proč je tato hra atraktivní i pro české tvůrce a diváky. Obrovská popularita hry *Tanec na konci léta* na českých jevištích je často vysvětlována tím, že nabízí pět velkých ženských rolí a s nimi i pět neobyčejných hereckých příležitostí. Práce se proto pokusí zjistit, je-li tato skutečnost opravdu jedinou motivací k inscenování hry. V neposlední řadě se diplomová práce zabývá otázkou, do jaké míry hře škodí potlačení témat vycházejících z irského kontextu a nejsou-li čeští diváci při sledování inscenace při neznalosti tohoto kontextu ochuzeni.

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1. Introduction

After its world premiere at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin in 1990, *Dancing at Lughnasa* gained critical and popular acclaim in Ireland and subsequently worldwide. Following the transfer of the original production, directed by Patrick Mason, to London and Broadway, the play received several awards, including the Olivier award as Play of the Year, three Tony Awards, including Best Play, and the New York Drama Critics Circle award for the Best Play. Three years after the triumphal success, the first Czech production opened at Divadlo na Vinohradech in Prague, followed by eight subsequent professional productions. The aim of this thesis is to compare the production history and reception of *Dancing at Lughnasa* in Irish and Czech contexts. The thesis asks the question – why is this memory play about the disintegration of one Irish family, told from the perspective of a seven-year-old boy, attractive also for Czech theatre practitioners and audience?

The first chapter attempts to analyse *Dancing at Lughnasa*, focussing mainly on the plot, structure, characters and central themes of the play. The main method employed is close reading of the play itself, yet secondary sources are also consulted. The analysis of the play is essential as it is referred to in subsequent chapters.

The second chapter is also theoretical, and outlines the social, political and historical context of *Dancing at Lughnasa*. The story is set into a specific time and place, which influences other aspects of the play. Many crucial moments from Irish history are referred to throughout, and even though Friel is not concerned with history to the extent that he was in some of his earlier works, the knowledge of the historical background is essential for the complete comprehension of the text. This chapter is divided into two parts, the first of which focuses on describing the setting of the play. Thus it is preoccupied with the 1930s in Ireland, but also beyond. “De Valera's Constitution”, emigration and the influence of the Irish Church on people's lives, as well as the Spanish Civil War, are some of the themes discussed in this part. The second part also deals with context – this time, the context of writing of the play. The story of the genesis of *Dancing at Lughnasa* based on Mel Gussow's interview with Brian Friel is told, and the author's gradual detachment from the Field Day Theatre Company, which he co-founded in 1980, is also mentioned. This part is based mainly on two publications – *Brian Friel in Conversation*, edited by Paul

Delaney and *Brian Friel. Essays, Diaries, Interviews: 1964-1999*, edited by Christopher Murray.

The principal and also the longest chapters of this thesis are chapters four and five, which will attempt to provide an outline of the five most significant productions in Ireland and in the Czech Republic. The Irish part includes the description of the world premiere of *Dancing at Lughnasa* at the Abbey Theatre, which was directed by Patrick Mason and premiered on 24th April 1990; the 1996 production from the Lyric Theatre Belfast directed by Conall Morrison; the revival of Patrick Mason's original production at the Abbey Theatre from 1999; Joe Dowling's production from The Gate Theatre (2004) and Mick Gordon's production at The Lyric Theatre Belfast from 2007. In terms of the Czech context, five most significant productions which are discussed in the following part are: the Czech premiere at Divadlo na Vinohradech, which was directed by Jan Burian and opened on 19th March 1993; Peter Gábor's production at Státní divadlo Ostrava, Divadlo Antonína Dvořáka, which premiered the same year; Jan Burian's production at Divadlo J.K.Tyla Plzeň from 1994; the production at Slezské divadlo Opava, directed by Jaroslava Šiktancová from 2004 and Ivan Balad'a's production at Městské divadlo Zlín from 2004. The individual subchapters attempt to give detailed descriptions of each production, regarding the director's concept, acting, stage design and critical acclaim. The main source material for writing these chapters will be reviews both from newspapers and from specialised theatre magazines, namely *Theatre Ireland* and *Irish Theatre Magazine* in terms of the Irish productions and *Divadelní noviny* (Theatre Newspapers) and *Svět a Divadlo* (World and Theatre) in Czech context. Other sources include programme brochures from the Abbey Theatre Archive and the Linen Hall Library, the seat of the Archive of the Lyric Theatre, Belfast and the Arts and Theatre Institute in Prague. The subchapter about the production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* from Slezské divadlo Opava in 2003, is based on an interview with the director, Jaroslava Šiktancová.

In the conclusion, the Czech and Irish productions will be compared in terms of the possible motivations of the various directors to stage this play and the critical acclaim earned by each production. The main issue – whether the simplification of certain aspects of Friel's text necessarily results in deprivation of the production – will be discussed.

2. Analysis of *Dancing at Lughnasa*

2.1 Plot

Dancing at Lughnasa is a memory play, in which the events are told from the perspective of a narrator, a young man called Michael. He chooses the actions and memories he wants to talk about; therefore, the plot is not linear, nor always logical, but could be compared to a mosaic, which is built gradually from individual fragments of memories.

Michael recalls the summer of 1936, when he was seven years old and lived in a country house with his mother, Christina Mundy, and his four aunts. In his mind, two memories are always linked together. These are the memories of their first wireless radio set and the joy it brought to their household, and the memory of his uncle's homecoming, which evoked ambiguous feelings. His uncle, Father Jack, is a missionary priest, who lived in a leper colony in a small village in Uganda for twenty-five years. Another important event Michael remembers is the visit of his father, Gerry Evans, whom he saw for the first time in his life in the summer of 1936.

The action of the play takes place in the home of the Mundy family, two miles outside the village of Ballybeg, County Donegal. The name of this mythical town invented by Friel literally means small town in Gaelic.¹ The five sisters, Kate (40), Maggie (38), Agnes (35), Rose (32) and Christina (26), are all unmarried and live together in a state of poverty and financial insecurity. Even though their lives could be described from the outside looking in as ordinary, uneventful and unfulfilled, they are relatively happy and they enjoy the small pleasures life has to offer. Having each other is a life sustaining force for them. On the other hand, there is a great tension among the sisters for different reasons. Elmer Andrews notes that, "The tragedy of the five sisters and their brother is that they have lost touch with their deepest emotions."² In the opening monologue the narrator also insinuates that things started to change after that summer and that their family structure was

¹ Mel Gussow, "In Interview with Mel Gussow," Christopher Murray, ed. *Essays, Diaries, Interviews: 1964-1999* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1999) 140.

² Elmer Andrews, *The Art of Brian Friel: Neither Reality Nor Dreams*. (London: Macmillan Press, 1995) 220.

soon to disintegrate.

The Mundy sisters face other “problems” – Christina “brought shame”³ on their family by having a child outside of marriage. Despite the fact that having an illegitimate child is in conflict with Catholic morality and that people in the surrounding area almost definitely looked down on Christina and her family as a result of this, all of the sisters love Christina’s son Michael dearly. No matter what the critical townspeople may think or say, Michael brings a lot of joy and happiness into all of their lives. It is the adherence to Catholic morality, and the prejudices of some of the people they are surrounded by, which makes their lives complicated.

Kate, the most pious Catholic, often rebukes her sisters and reminds them of their responsibilities in the household. Kate's need for order and doing what is expected of her is illuminated clearly in a scene in which the sisters talk about going to a harvest dance. They are all very enthusiastic and excited about the idea of going, and nearly agree on attending, but Kate, who always has the final word, suddenly changes her mind. She realises that it would not be proper for several reasons:

Look at yourselves, will you? Just look at yourselves! Dancing at our time of day? That's for young people with no duties and no responsibilities and nothing in their heads but pleasure. [...] Do you want the whole countryside to be laughing at us? – Women of our years? – mature women, *dancing*? What's come over you all? And this is Father Jack's home – we must never forget that – ever. No, no, we're going to no harvest dance.⁴

A compensation for the harvest dance seems to be a spontaneous and wild dance the sisters perform shortly after that discussion. Dancing to songs on the radio seems to be their substitute for all of the entertainment and social activities they lack. It is also the only way some of them can express their true feelings, their real selves. Dancing is their only distraction from their everyday routine, their only means of escape from the drudgery of their day-to-day lives.

The Mundy sisters are very proud of their brother Jack. Having a priest in the family was a great honour in the era that the play was set in.⁵ The fact that he is

³ Brian Friel. *Dancing at Lughnasa* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990) 7.

⁴ Friel 10.

⁵ Friel 7.

a missionary priest adds to the family's respectability within the community:

And every so often when a story would appear in the Donegal Enquirer about "our own leper priest" as they called him – because Ballybeg was proud of him, the whole of Donegal was proud of him – it was only natural that our family would enjoy a small share of that fame – it gave us that little bit of status in the eyes of the parish. And it must have helped my aunts to bear the shame Mother brought on the household by having me – as it was called then – out of wedlock.⁶

However, after Jack's return things begin to change for the Mundys. Despite the fact that the sisters await Father Jack's return impatiently, his homecoming ends up being a disappointment and is somewhat disillusioning for them. At the beginning of the play, he is very confused. He does not recognise his sisters or the house; his mind seems to be absent, probably still in Africa. He struggles to find suitable English vocabulary to express himself. However, what is most alarming is that he keeps talking about rituals, sacrifices to gods and other aspects of pagan religion, as well as everyday life in the leper colony. At first, his sisters think that his strange conversation and behaviour is caused by malaria. However it becomes apparent, especially in Act Two, that it is not just the illness which has changed him so significantly. Ironically, Father Jack, an Irish Catholic priest went native during his twenty-five years in Africa. This conversion is, of course, utterly unacceptable in their community, and it frightens his sisters, especially Kate. Not only is she the most staunch, arguably even bigoted Catholic, but her job is also dependent on the parish priest. Unfortunately, he soon finds out about Father Jack's change, and as a consequence, he never visits him, never invites him to say mass and worse, makes Kate redundant under a false pretence – the falling numbers of pupils at school. Because of this, the family loses their only stable income and is economically ruined, leading to other tragic consequences.⁷

The unannounced visit of Michael's father, Gerry Evans, is another event which Michael remembers vividly, because it creates tangible tension among the Mundy sisters. Each of the sisters reacts to his appearance in a noticeably different way. Christina, despite being angry with Gerry, is apparently still in love with him.⁸ She is well aware of the fact that their relationship will never work out, but she

⁶ Friel 6– 7.

⁷ Friel 32.

cannot help herself feeling happy in his presence. Kate, on the other hand, is infuriated by his visit – she cannot forgive him for the fact that he has abandoned Christina on several occasions, and she cannot understand how he can be so brazen as to show up again. However, Christina flourishes in Gerry’s presence and, for a few moments, it seems as they could be a happy couple. Christina is not the only one who has a love affair in the course of the play. Rose, the second youngest of the sisters, who is described as simple, experiences a sexual awakening. Unfortunately, her sweetheart is Danny Bradly, a man from Ballybeg of tainted reputation. He has three children and a wife, who left him to emigrate to England. Danny pays Rose compliments, gives her presents and invites her on dates, and she trusts him and truly loves him. Despite her sisters' surveillance, Rose manages to escape on a secret date with Danny. The scene in which her sisters find out that she is missing and realise where she probably is, is one of the most dramatic scenes of the whole play. The last scene is very idyllic. The characters are sitting together in the garden and talking as a happy family. Yet before this scene, their tragic fates are revealed by the narrator, therefore undermining the portrayed perfection. Rose and Agnes will go to London, where they will die in poverty. Father Jack will die of a heart attack within a year. The lives of those who are left will never be the same. The sad break-up of the Mundy family lies inevitably ahead. We realise that these happy and harmonious moments are, in fact, some of the last moments they spend together. Although this fact makes the end of the play tragic, the final tone is not pessimistic. There is no place for pessimism, because Michael is bewitched by memory and the way it works:

But there is one memory of that Lughnasa time that visits me most often; and what fascinates me about that memory is that it owes nothing to fact. In that memory atmosphere is more real than incident and everything is simultaneously actual and illusory.⁹

Surprisingly, even though he is aware of the tragic facts from the past, he is enchanted by the dream-like memory, which helps him to reconcile with the past. According to Elmer Andrews, “This is the space somewhere between the real world and fairy/land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet. Life retains its

⁸ Friel 19– 26.

⁹ Friel 56– 57.

aura of enchantment. The play refuses pessimism.”¹⁰

2.2 Structure

The structure of *Dancing at Lughnasa* is closely connected with its genre, which is the genre of the memory play. This play has been compared for example to Frank McGuinness' *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (1985)¹¹ or Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1944).¹² In fact, Fintan O'Toole states that *Dancing at Lughnasa* is strongly connected to Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*:

The connections [...] are reasonably obvious ones. The use of the narrator as a device for the suspension and conflation of time, the elegiac tone of the narrator, the use of a mentally disturbed young woman (Laura, Rose) whose sexuality takes on critical edge, the guilty departure of the narrator, the sense of a family trapped as an anachronism in an increasingly hostile world, the persistence of old ceremonies, and, above all perhaps the use of music, all link the plays together.¹³

The drawback of the genre of memory play is that such plays sometimes tend to be nostalgic, and not very dramatic. In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the narrative form and direct action are alternated in a very sophisticated way, so the play never becomes boring or overly lengthy. On the contrary, the alternation of those two modes often creates great dramatic tension. According to Fintan O'Toole, the tension which provides the drama of this play is “the tension between the onrush of time, on the one hand, and the frame within which time is frozen and contained on the other.”¹⁴

In many of his previous plays Friel was preoccupied with the function of language. Tony Corbett observes that “There is certainly a progression beyond words in Friel's work.”¹⁵ Whereas in *Translations*, the characters have to learn a new language, in *The Communication Cord*, that language “becomes part of a Babel of

¹⁰ Andrews 232.

¹¹ Helen Lojek, “*Dancing at Lughnasa* and the unfinished revolution,” Anthony Roche, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Brian Friel* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 80.

¹² Andrews 219.

¹³ Fintan O'Toole, “Marking Time: From *Making History* to *Dancing at Lughnasa*,” Alan Peacock, ed. *The Achievement of Brian Friel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 208 – 209.

¹⁴ Peacock 208-209.

¹⁵ Tony Corbett, *Brian Friel. Decoding the Language of the Tribe* (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2002) 63.

voices, all speaking but not understood”¹⁶ and in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, verbal communication is partially substituted by music and dance.¹⁷ Such non-verbal expression on stage includes the powerful scenes of dancing and the opening and closing tableaux, which are accompanied by Michael's nostalgic monologue. In her essay “*Dancing at Lughnasa* and The Unfinished Revolution”, Helen Lojek explains: “Friel balances narration with a second theatrical mode. A stage is a space to be filled, and the play's narration is accompanied by significant non-verbal moments.”¹⁸ By this device Friel achieves a play that is much more than just a set of nostalgic fragments surrounded by a bittersweet atmosphere.

The structure was described by Elmer Andrews as “associative rather than strictly logical.”¹⁹ That is because we see the scenes through the narrator's subjective memories.²⁰ Andrews also notes that “In *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), the device of the boy/narrator allows memory to control and dominate the stage.”²¹ Therefore, what we see on stage is the dramatisation of Michael's memories. Michael is not a mere narrator, he is also a commentator. He knows how the unfinished stories unfold, which is only ever insinuated in the action of the play. In his monologues, he anticipates the following sad events and comments on them from his adult point of view. However, Michael never tells us anything from his present life. Michael could be described as an unreliable narrator, because he admits that he is fascinated by the way memory functions and he cannot be sure if what he recalls happened exactly as he remembers it, or if it is partially altered by his imagination. As Andrews puts it, “Michael is exploring his own memory and he admits its arbitrary nature: ‘[...] memories offer themselves to me.’”²² He is aware of the fact that some of his memories might be biased. And yet it is Michael's mind and memory which unify the individual episodes, and create the framework of the play.

Like some of Brian Friel's other plays, such as *The Loves of Cass McGuire*,

¹⁶ Crobett 63.

¹⁷ Crobett 63.

¹⁸ Roche 81.

¹⁹ Andrews 219.

Munira Hamud Mutran, “The Two Mirrors of Brian Friel in *The Mundy Scheme* and *Dancing at Lughnasa*,” C.C. Barfoot and W.Z. Van Den Doel, ed. *Ritual Remembering History, Myth and Politics in Anglo – Irish Drama* (Amsterdam, Atlanta, GA, 1995) 142 – 143.

²¹ Andrews 219.

²² Andrews 219.

Faith Healer and *The Freedom of the City*²³, as well as many other Irish plays,²⁴ *Dancing at Lughnasa* frequently uses the mode of storytelling. Even though Michael is the narrator of this play – the main storyteller – he is not the only one.²⁵ Storytelling occupies a great space in the play, and almost every character tells a story to the others at some point. Kate, for example, brings all the news from Ballybeg, so she also talks about meeting Maggie's best friend Bernie O'Donnell. Consequently, Maggie tells the others about secretly escaping to a dance contest with Bernie and two boys. Rose talks enthusiastically about Lughnasa fires and rituals in the back hills. Another eager storyteller is Father Jack, who keeps describing his life in Ryanga. Gerry Evans also loves telling stories, usually stories which he has made up, or at least heavily embellished.

Even though it has been stated that the structure of *Dancing at Lughnasa* is not strictly logical²⁶, a certain logical pattern can be found in it. First of all, the play seems to be cyclical. The end of the play is almost the same as the beginning – the characters stand, or sit, motionless in tableau, while Michael talks to the audience. Michael's speeches at the beginning and at the end also include similar, or even identical, features. Secondly, even though this might not be visible from the first reading, the individual scenes very logically flow into one another. The alternation of narrative passages with non-verbal, or visually powerful scenes, also seem to be planned very thoroughly.

2.3 Characters

The characters of *Dancing at Lughnasa* are the five Mundy sisters, who are modelled on Friel's aunts²⁷, and three men: Father Jack, the sisters' brother and a missionary priest, Michael's father Gerry Evans, and Michael (as an adult) – the narrator.

Michael/Narrator, a young man of unspecified age, delves into his memories and recalls the summer of 1936. Brian Friel establishes the convention that adult

²³ Roche 79.

²⁴ For example Connor McPherson's *The Weir*, or Tom Murphy's *Bailegangaire*.

²⁵ Roche 81.

²⁶ Andrews 219.

²⁷ Murray 139.

Michael also vocalises the child version of the character Michael – the Boy, who is physically absent from the stage. Therefore, whenever the other characters talk to the Boy, they speak to an imaginary character and “the narrator responds in his normal voice.”²⁸ A big event of the summer for Michael is the return of Uncle Jack and the visit of his father. Even though Michael was just a child then, he admits that he had a certain “sense of unease”²⁹, because it was the last summer the whole family was together.

Kate, as is the oldest of the sisters, and the only one with a reliable income, takes over the parental role, assuming the position of a leader and the head of the family. As Kate works as a schoolteacher, she sometimes treats her sisters like her pupils and her tone and style can be viewed as somewhat pedagogical. As a result of this, she can sometimes seem a little patronising in her attitude to her sisters and she keeps reminding them of the right manners they should use and their familial duties. Being a very conservative person, Kate also loves order and having things under control. She feels responsible for her younger sisters and for the reputation of their family. Kate also represents the guardian of the Catholic faith in their household and disapproves of anything which could threaten the Catholic morality, such as Rose's talking about the festival of Lughnasa, naming the wireless set Lugh, Father Jack's stories about Africa, and even simple dancing to the songs on the radio. For Kate, a devout religiousness seems to implicitly go hand-in-hand with a self-imposed ban on enjoyment. Kate seldom shows her real self, her worries or weaknesses and Maggie, the second oldest of the sisters, seems to be her only confidante. In one scene she confides in Maggie about her fear of the disintegration of their family:

You try to keep the home together. You perform your duties as best as you can – because you believe in responsibilities and obligations and good order. And then suddenly, suddenly you realise that hair cracks are appearing everywhere; that control is slipping away; that the whole thing is so fragile it can't be held together much longer. It's all about to collapse.³⁰

Sadly enough, her worries turn out to be justified.

Maggie understands Kate most of all, even though their personalities are very different. Maggie is very light-hearted; she loves enjoying the little pleasures of life

²⁸ Friel 5.

²⁹ Friel 2.

³⁰ Friel 27.

like singing (“those aul pagan songs”³¹), dancing, talking about men, smoking Wild Woodbines or teasing Michael by giving him riddles to work out and playing tricks on him. If Kate personifies the grip of the Catholic Church at the time, Maggie is the representative of unrestrained paganism. Michael also describes her as “the joker of the family.”³² Despite the fact that Kate and Maggie have many conflicts, they understand and support each other and Maggie is a great support and comfort to Kate at some of the most difficult times in the play, such as when Rose is missing and the household is overcome by a sense of despair. In these fraught situations, Maggie is the one who stays calm and tells the others what to do.

Agnes is dreamy and seldom talks – as if she prefers observing everything around her without having the need to comment. She has taken on “the role of special protector [of Rose].”³³ She talks to Rose calmly and kindly, even when the other sisters are running out of patience with her. Therefore, it is no wonder that Agnes and Rose seem to be an inseparable couple. They do everything together and they also decide to leave the family together in the end. The question remains, however, whether their financial instability was the only motivation for such a decision. Agnes is also a character surrounded by some mystery. Because of her taciturnity, we do not have many possibilities to learn about her opinions or past. Unlike Maggie, Rose or Chris, she never talks about there being any men in her life. Therefore, when Gerry shows up and asks about Agnes (and later on dances with her, even making Christina jealous in the process), it seems as if there was, or is, a mutual attraction between Agnes and Gerry.

Despite her psychological simplicity, Rose is a very complex character. Because of her naive and simplified view of the world, she often offers a different perspective on events to that of her sisters. From her childlike point of view, she often sees things as they really are. She also acts without inhibition and says the unpleasant truth – sometimes quite tactlessly. After her return from the secret date with Danny Bradley, she is a changed woman. Friel describes Rose's change in the following words: “Indeed, had we not seen the Rose of Act One, we might not now be immediately aware of her disability. At first look, this might be any youngish

³¹ Friel 27.

³² Friel 1.

³³ Friel iv.

country woman, carefully dressed, not unattractive, returning from a long walk on a summer day.”³⁴ Rose's rebirth from “the simple Rose in wellington boots and an apron”³⁵ to “a well– dressed country woman”³⁶ also corresponds with the way she acts and expresses herself. When her sisters question her about the date, she answers calmly and coherently. She also refuses to tell them everything that has happened in the back hills – the underlying implication, as outlined above, is that Rose was raped by Danny, although this is never explicitly expressed by Friel.

Christina, who is the youngest of the five sisters, is an unmarried mother of seven-year old Michael. She may have had a normal family had her lover not been Gerry Evans. Gerry is an unreliable and irresponsible young man, who does not take care of Chris or their son. However, he comes for a surprise visit every year or so, and occasionally proposes to Chris. When he leaves, she collapses into depression. Even though this probably happens repeatedly, Chris is not angry with him when he comes again. It is clear from their first dialogue that she is still in love with him although she is well aware of the fact that he will never assume the responsibilities associated with marriage. She is not naive, though. Andrews notes that “Chris knows not to be taken in by him. She is realistic enough to see that however attractive her playboy may be, he is not to be trusted with her heart.”³⁷ Thus, when Gerry proposes to her (again), she rejects him with the following words: “[...] But you'd walk out on me again. You wouldn't intend to but that's what would happen because that's your nature and you can't help yourself. [...] Don't talk anymore no more words. Just dance me down the lane and then you'll leave.”³⁸ Her sisters witness that in Gerry's presence Chris, who previously had complained about being “far too pale”³⁹ and about “the aul mousey hair”⁴⁰, transforms into an attractive young woman, who is “as beautiful as Bernie O'Donnelll any day”⁴¹. Even though it is Kate who recognises and admits Gerry's influence on Chris' positive mood change, she is also terribly worried and infuriated. Kate is sure that the happier Chris is in Gerry's presence, the more she will suffer after Gerry's departure.

³⁴ Friel 44.

³⁵ Friel iv.

³⁶ Friel 44.

³⁷ Andrews 229.

³⁸ Friel 26.

³⁹ Friel 2.

⁴⁰ Friel 2.

We probably won't see Mr Evans for another year – until the humour suddenly takes him again. [...] And in the meantime it's Christina's heart that gets crushed again. That's what I mind. But what really infuriates me is that the creature has no sense of ordinary duty. Does he ever wonder how she clothes and feeds Michael? Does he ask her? Does he care?⁴²

Gerry is irresponsible, unreliable, reckless, unfaithful and untruthful, but is also charming, loving and attentive. He can only live in the moment. He is a daydreamer, who cannot help making up fascinating stories around day-to-day mundane things and also lying about more serious things. He secretly dreams about having an opportunity to carry out big, heroic deeds. Therefore, he decides to fight with the International Brigade in Spain. He tries to explain his determination to Chris: “[...] And I thought I should try my hand at something worthy for a change. Give Evans a Big Cause and he won't let you down. It's only everyday stuff he's not so successful at.”⁴³ However, Gerry is also incapable of staying at one place or fulfilling his dreams or resolutions. Michael remembers: “He still visited us occasionally, perhaps once a year. Each time he was on the brink of a new career. And each time he proposed to Mother and promised me a new bike.”⁴⁴ Of course, none of this ever happened. Gerry brings change into the lives of the Mundy sisters and his son Michael. Andrews notes:

Gerry is a dangerously disruptive influence who acts as a catalyst for many of the tensions that exist between the members of the family, especially when he shifts his attentions from Chris to Agnes at the end. His presence awakens the sisters' repressed sexuality: seeing him approach the house, they all begin to prettify themselves in front of the mirror and watch his every move from the garden window with entranced curiosity [...]⁴⁵

Thanks to Gerry's visit, the typical lives of the sisters are changed. They suddenly experience something unusual and exciting. Some of the sisters welcome such change, others are angry about it. Kate is the most critical of “the jaunty, smiling Gerry”⁴⁶, because he “threatens confusion and disruption to her careful order.”⁴⁷ Furthermore, Gerry could be also interpreted as one of the characters who symbolises paganism, which is in contrast with Kate's bigoted Catholicism. Apart from having an

⁴¹ Friel 26.

⁴² Friel 26.

⁴³ Friel 24.

⁴⁴ Friel 47.

⁴⁵ Andrews 229.

⁴⁶ Andrews 229.

⁴⁷ Andrews 229.

illegitimate son, he is going to “to fight for godless Communism.”⁴⁸ Gerry could be described as a visitor from the outside world, who brings changes and poses as a distraction from the sisters' everyday routine, which is important not only for the Mundy sisters, but especially for Michael, who remembers his visit as one of the most significant events from that year. Andrews explains: “In Michael's imagination, Father Jack and Gerry have acquired a large and luminous presence in his memory of the drab, female world in which he was brought up.”⁴⁹

Jack comes back home from Africa after twenty-five years. He worked in a leper colony in a village called Ryanga in Uganda. At first, the reason he was sent back home seems to be his illness, but it later becomes apparent that Jack had gone native, and therefore could no longer maintain the status of a Catholic missionary priest. When his sisters realise that he has acquired this pagan faith, they are shocked and Kate is, predictably, the most troubled by this. African pagan religion is a parallel to Celtic paganism, represented mainly by the festival of Lughnasa. It is suggested at many points in the play that some pagan rituals and habits may be a more natural alternative to strict Catholicism. Father Jack seems to have loved his life in Ryanga, and he talks about all of its aspects with enthusiasm. When his memory improves in Act Two, he can express himself in a much clearer, more eloquent way. He is no longer disorientated and it is apparent that he can think with more clarity. However, even with his heightened awareness in Act Two, Jack does not stop talking passionately about his life in Ryanga. As his sisters cannot ascribe his confusion to malaria anymore, it becomes clear that Jack's former life as a priest and his Catholic faith are now very distant from him. Besides, it becomes clear that Ballybeg is not his home anymore – he still dreams about going back to Ryanga.

[Uncle Jack] never lost his determination to return to Uganda and he still talked passionately about his life with the lepers there. And each new anecdote contained more revelations. And each new revelation startled – shocked – stunned poor Aunt Kate. Until finally she hit on a phrase that appeased her: “his own distinctive spiritual search”. “Leaping around a fire and offering a little hen to Uka or Ito or whoever is not religion as I was taught it and indeed know it,” she would say with a defiant toss of

⁴⁸ Friel 41.

⁴⁹ Andrews 220.

her head. "But then Jack must make his own distinctive search."⁵⁰

Surprisingly, Kate, who is most troubled by Jack's conversion, finally finds a way to become reconciled with it. Like Gerry, Father Jack brings a significant change into the lives of the Mundy family. Despite his tragic aspects, Jack is also the bearer of comical elements in this play. Friel achieves this mainly by using irony. The mere fact that a Catholic priest from Ireland goes native during his mission is very ironic. Individual situations, in which Jack unintentionally shocks and frightens his sisters by talking about ancestral spirits, animal sacrifice, drinking palm wine, dancing around the fire and living amongst people in polygamous marriages, are some of the most comical parts of the play.

2.4 Themes

Memory is presumably one of the main themes of *Dancing at Lughnasa* and it is discussed on many levels. As Elmer Andrews notes, the play is concerned with the examination of personal, as well as of collective memory.⁵¹ Personal memory is exhibited for example by the memories of the individual characters, primarily of Michael. Collective memory can be represented by the pagan festival of Lughnasa, which is still surviving in the back hills despite the disfavour towards this pagan celebration within the Catholic community.⁵² Friel is also fascinated by the nature of memory. In the concluding monologue, Michael says about his most common memory: "what fascinates me about that memory is that it owes nothing to fact. In that memory atmosphere is more real than incident and everything is simultaneously actual and illusory."⁵³ What is fascinating about memory is the way it is capable of capturing an atmosphere. At the beginning of the play Michael also admits that he does not control his memory. He does not choose what he will retell the audience because "different kinds of memories offer themselves"⁵⁴ to him. The theme of memory and especially of its dysfunction is also communicated through the character of Father Jack. After his homecoming, he appears helpless, because he cannot

⁵⁰ Friel 47.

⁵¹ Andrews 226.

⁵² Andrews 226.

⁵³ Friel 56.

remember his sisters' names, the layout of the house or his English vocabulary. What he does remember very well, however, is his life in Ryanga. He loves recollecting the time he spend there and sharing stories from his mission with his sisters. The fact that his memories from that period are dangerously vivid has its meaning. It could be assumed that Jack chooses to remember the world of pagan rituals and living in harmony with nature, because that world is closer to his heart than his home in Donegal.

The character of Father Jack opens another major theme of this play, which is the conflict between Catholicism and paganism. Even though his going native with all its consequences could be interpreted as the main source of comedy in this play, there are more serious aspects to it. Catholicism and its attendant morality influence the lives of the sisters negatively. It restricts them and prevents them from being free and doing what they really desire. For instance, it would be unacceptable to go to the harvest dance, because of their age, because they are not married, because there is an illegitimate child in their family, and moreover because of simple Rose who is experiencing sexual awakening. This restriction creates frustration which troubles their lives to a great extent. The contrasting situation of those “savages from the back hills”⁵⁵ or the Ryangans, whose lives are unrestricted and whose “religious rituals naturally grow into a secular celebration”⁵⁶, who are “are eager to have love children”⁵⁷ seems to be a more fortunate alternative:

Oh, yes, the Ryangans are a remarkable people: there is no distinction between the religious and the secular in their culture. And of course their capacity for fun, for laughing, for practical jokes - they've such open hearts! In some respects they're not unlike us. You'd love them, Maggie. You should come back with me.⁵⁸

This comparison creates the link between Ryanga and the remainder of what is Celtic in Ballybeg. Some of the rituals described by Father Jack while talking about the two main festivals in Ryanga are very similar to those originally practiced during Lughnasa. As insinuated at the end of the previous quotation, Maggie is another character who is close to paganism. One of the critics reviewing the world premiere of *Dancing at Lughnasa* describes Anita Reeves' portrayal of Maggie as

⁵⁴ Friel 1.

⁵⁵ Friel 13.

⁵⁶ Friel 37.

⁵⁷ Friel 31.

“full-blooded, lusty pagan.”⁵⁹ Despite their closeness, Maggie and Kate display contrasting personalities. This contrast is expressed already in Michael's opening monologue:

We got our first wireless set that summer — well, a sort of a set; and it obsessed us. And because it arrived as August was about to begin, my Aunt Maggie — she was the joker of the family — she suggested we give it a name. She wanted to call it Lugh after the old Celtic God of the Harvest. [...] But Aunt Kate — she was a national schoolteacher and a very proper woman — she said it would be sinful to christen an inanimate object with any kind of name, not to talk of a pagan god. So we just called it Marconi because that was the name emblazoned on the set.⁶⁰

Throughout the play Maggie, similarly to Father Jack, brings the pagan element into proceedings. She keeps singing (“pagan songs”⁶¹) dancing and trying to bring good mood into their household, and to cheer them up in difficult situations. Most importantly, Maggie also starts the famous dance sequence, which is often associated with the manifestation of the sisters' underlying paganism.

Even though Friel created many powerful female characters before writing *Dancing at Lughnasa*, this time his female characters are based on the real-life models. Even though the play is not autobiographical, Friel admits certain aspects of autobiography by dedicating it “In memory of those five brave Glenties women.”⁶² The role of women in Irish society is another important theme of the play. According to the 1937 Constitution, the ideal of woman in Ireland of the 1930s was that woman should be a wife and a mother, who looks after the children and the household.⁶³ In this play, Kate takes up the role of man of the house – she is in charge of the household, she has the final word on all matters. She also has the same attitude towards the housework as the new Constitution of Ireland. As Helen Lojek puts it, Kate dismisses the value of unpaid household work just as the 1937 Constitution was to do.⁶⁴ Women were also restricted by the morals of 1930s society. For example, it was not proper for an unmarried woman after certain age to go to a dance. Unmarried

⁵⁸ Friel 38.

⁵⁹ Mary O'Donnell, “Private feeling at odds with public virtue,” *The Sunday Tribune*, 29 April 1990.

⁶⁰ Friel 1.

⁶¹ Friel 27.

⁶² Friel iv.

⁶³ “*Constitution 1937*,” *Legislationonline.org*. Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2004-2013. < <http://www.legislationonline.org/documents/id/5284>>13 March 2013.

⁶⁴ Roche 80.

women with a child were looked down on as the shame of their families. But in the play, the Mundy sisters do not really meet the requirements of the community they live in. They may be outcasts in the eyes of their neighbours because they do not act according to what is expected of them. However, this is what makes them heroes. Lojek explains this in the following words: “ Even though their lives are shaped by things they *cannot* do, they are most notable for things they *do not* do.”⁶⁵ They did not put Rose to an institution, neither did they put Michael to an orphanage. They do not blame Chris for having Michael out of wedlock. Moreover, Chris declines Gerry's proposal even though she loves him.⁶⁶

The theme of language, or communication in general, which is the major concern of Friel's previous play, *Translations* is also an important theme of *Dancing at Lughnasa*. In this play language seems to have been devaluated and nonverbal communication substitutes for language at many points. When Michael speaks of his last memory of the family being together in the concluding monologue, he describes it in the following words: “Dancing as if language had surrendered to movement. Dancing as if language no longer existed because words were no longer necessary.”⁶⁷ Gerry is much better at dancing than at talking – as if dancing did not restrict him from revealing his real self. Moreover, Gerry and Chris share a mutual passion for dancing. Dancing also takes the place of ritual in the play, not only the pagan rituals, but also a wedding. Towards the end of the play, Michael describes his parents' dancing as a wedding ceremony.⁶⁸ The most famous dance scene and also the most remembered moment of the play, is the wild dance of all five Mundy sisters in Act One. In this scene dancing is the expression of freedom and helps to release the sisters' emotions and frustration. For some of them, dancing is the only way they can escape from reality. This dance shows the release of the sisters' frustration and suppressed desires. This is the defining moment of the play, when all of them, even the prim and proper Kate, turn into savages.

⁶⁵ Roche 86.

⁶⁶ Roche 86.

⁶⁷ Friel 56.

⁶⁸ Friel 32.

3. The Context of *Dancing at Lughnasa*

3.1 The setting of *Dancing at Lughnasa*

Unlike Brian Friel's other plays, such as *Translations*, *The Communication Cord*, and *Making History*, which deal directly with history, *Dancing at Lughnasa* is focused on more personal themes. If it is concerned with history, it serves more as a background to the play, rather than a theme in and of itself. As a result of this, *Dancing at Lughnasa* has been interpreted as a story centred around the disintegration of the Mundy family, the story of five brave sisters, in many Czech productions. The main themes were sometimes reduced in Czech productions to a focus on the importance of family and basic feelings such as love and support of one's brethren. As a result of such simplifications, Czech audiences may have been deprived of some of the best qualities of the play. The background of the play, which has been sidelined, is very important in enabling full comprehension of the play. Even though *Dancing at Lughnasa* does not deal with historical themes directly, the characters are naturally influenced by their social background. The play reflects the broader social framework of a set time and place, the year 1936, in the fictitious town of Ballybeg, county Donegal, Ireland. For those who might not automatically associate the year 1936 with Eamon de Valera, Friel makes his intention to connect the two very clear in Maggie's parodic version of Rose's song about Abyssinia: "Will you vote for de Valera, will you vote?"¹ The summer of 1936 was the time when de Valera was working on the New Constitution.² It was ten years after de Valera founded Fianna Fáil, which won the election in 1932 and he became the Irish head of government, an Taoiseach.³ Taking the New Constitution into consideration is crucial in order to gain a full understanding of the context of the play, as it deeply influences the lives of the characters. Even though de Valera retained features of the 1922 constitution of the Irish Free State regarding the Oireachtas, the government, and the courts, there were important differences between the 1922 constitution and the

¹ Brian Friel. *Dancing at Lughnasa* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990) 3.

² S. J. Connolly, ed. *Oxford Companion to Irish History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 118.

³ R.F. Foster. *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (London: Penguin Books, 1989) 532.

constitution which was passed as law in December 1937.⁴ The most important parts of the revised constitution in terms of the context of *Dancing at Lughnasa* are Articles 40-45, which showed the influence of Catholic social thinking and dealt with fundamental rights concerning family, education, private property, and religion.⁵ The most controversial parts of the constitution in 1937 were the role of the president, which was by his opponents considered dictatorial; the “special position” accorded to the Catholic Church in article 44 and the status accorded to women.⁶ The Constitution asserted that the state recognised “the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of society”⁷ and “guaranteed its right as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and State.”⁸ The Constitution affirmed basic Catholic social teaching and also committed the state to do its utmost to secure the rural civilization that De Valera so devoutly desired.⁹ It was in the main a Catholic society, where the population would expect Catholic social teaching, especially when it touched on marriage and family law to be expressed juridicially.¹⁰

The articles in the Constitution defining the family and the powers given to the Catholic Church relate strongly to portrayals of the family unit and the Catholic Church in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Elmer Andrews notes that the Mundy sisters are “the victims of an oppressively Catholic ethos, shortly to be enshrined in a constitution.”¹¹ This constitution gave “the special position of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Roman Church as the guardian of the faith professed by the great majority of its citizens”¹². Moreover the Free State outlawed divorce, contraception and abortion as a result of the “demand for traditional Catholic social teaching in matters of marriage and family law.”¹³ In terms of the new Constitution, where a woman is defined as a “wife and mother”: her “life” (not her work) within the home “gives to

⁴ Connolly 118.

⁵ Connolly 118 – 119.

⁶ Terrence Brown. *Ireland – A Social and Cultural History 1922-1985* (London: Fontana Press, 1985) 164.

⁷ “Constitution 1937,” *Legislationonline.org*. Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2004-2013. < <http://www.legislationonline.org/documents/id/5284>> 13 March 2013.

⁸ “Constitution 1937,” *Legislationonline.org*. Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2004-2013. < <http://www.legislationonline.org/documents/id/5284>> 13 March 2013.

⁹ Brown 165.

¹⁰ Brown 165.

¹¹ Elmer Andrews, *The Art of Brian Friel: Neither Reality Nor Dreams* (London: Macmillan Press, 1995) 220.

¹² Andrews 220.

¹³ Andrews 220.

the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved,”¹⁴ the Mundy family is not a traditional, proper Irish family. None of the sisters are married, Chris has an illegitimate son and, moreover, she is not eager to get married when Gerry proposes to her. Helen Lojek comments that

Such legislative paternalism restricted women's roles outside the home and granted them less than equal citizenry. It was widely criticized at the time (usually by women) for its failure to preserve the promise of equality offered in both the 1916 Declaration and the 1922 Constitution.¹⁵

In terms of the assumption that women's roles should be firmly placed within the constraints of the home, the Mundy sisters meet the requirements of the New Constitution. All of them except for Kate work at home and take care of the household. Kate, who assumes the role of a man in this respect, is the bread-winner and the only one with a job outside the home and a stable income. Job opportunities for women in Ireland (especially rural Ireland) were poor in 1936.¹⁶ If a woman had a job, she would normally have to quit it as soon as she got married and women were also paid less than men.¹⁷ Marriage was seen as the main aim for women of the time, and often also the only possibility for many women in terms of progression.¹⁸ Not being married influenced the lives of the sisters economically and also socially. The fact that they were not married prevented them from going to the harvest dance, because in the community, being unmarried woman of “their age”¹⁹ and going to a dance was simply unacceptable.²⁰ And yet, dancing is the only way the Mundy sisters can express their energy and frustration, their feelings.

Dancing is also the primary mode of communication between Chris and Gerry. Dancing is the sisters' favourite activity, although they usually have to dance on their own, without partners. There are also various forms of dance visible throughout the play— Gerry teaches ballroom dancing, each of the sisters has their own special style of dancing during the famous dance of the sisters in Act One and Jack performs a dance inspired by African rituals. The sisters also talk about the

¹⁴ Helen Lojek, “*Dancing at Lughnasa* and the unfinished revolution,” Anthony Roche, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Brian Friel*, (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 78.

¹⁵ Roche 78.

¹⁶ Roche 80.

¹⁷ Roche 80.

¹⁸ Roche 85.

¹⁹ Friel 80.

harvest dance in Ballybeg and its antipode – the pagan and probably illegal outdoor dances, which are organised by the people from the back hills. These outdoor dances also include alcohol drinking, fires and possibly some other rituals – remnants of pagan traditions. In terms of historical context, there was a law, the Public Dance Hall Acts, passed in 1935, which banned such dances, because unregulated dancing was considered immoral.²¹ Andrews explains: “In the repressive climate of the 1930s, dancing was regarded with some suspicion as representing a species of moral decadence and a threat to the morals of the nation's youth.”²² Lojek adds that the uncontrolled crossroad dances were “viewed by the Catholic clergy as a powerful lure toward improper behaviour and often credited the increase in illegitimate births”²³ The Public Dance Hall Act required licensing of dance-halls, which did away with open-air dancing at crossroads and dances held in private houses. Because the dancing moved inside, set dancing, which was regarded as a foreign import could be eliminated in favour of ceili dancing, which was considered proper Irish dancing.²⁴ Ironically, as Lojek puts it, “Later, as dance halls replaced live music with gramophones or radio, ceili music adapted contemporary rhythms and often yielded entirely to imported music.”²⁵ Andrews also observes the irony in the Public Dance Hall Acts, as they contributed to the dying out of many traditional customs: “Ironically the government which enacted it [the Public Dance Hall Acts] was officially pledged to a revival of Irish folklore and Irish traditional music and dancing.”²⁶

The revival of Irish folklore was part of the dominant ideology of the country, which was “in favour of achieving and maintaining as much self-sufficient Irish independence as was possible.”²⁷ The independence was partly shown by the existence of the ancient Gaelic Irish nation, which is still present in Ireland’s distinctive culture.²⁸ Traditional music was elevated to “a position in official esteem,

²⁰ Friel 10.

²¹ Roche 85.

²² Andrews 223.

²³ Roche 85.

²⁴ Roche 85.

²⁵ Roche 85.

²⁶ Andrews 223.

²⁷ Brown 146.

²⁸ Brown 146 -147.

second only to the Irish language.”²⁹ On one hand, Irish folk culture and traditions were encouraged, but on the other hand, Catholic morality suppressed those traditional customs. Paradoxically the Irish Folklore Commission, which focused on collecting materials on popular customs, traditions and beliefs was established in 1935, the same year the Public Dance Hall Act, which helped the destroying of some forms of Irish folklore, was passed.³⁰

As the Mundy sisters could not enjoy the harvest dance, their passion for dancing was confined to their kitchen where they danced along with songs from the radio. The Mundy family was certainly not the only one of their time to be obsessed with the radio. In the 1930s, radios began to become popular as a form of home entertainment.³¹ Brown explains that the initial radio broadcasts, which started in 1920 from the national radio station, had been of very low power and people from just a small part of the country could hear them. However, in 1933 the high-powered station was opened in Athlone and since then radio broadcasts were much more widely available.³² Yet, radio was not only a form of entertainment, but also, as Lojek puts it, “a powerful instrument in unifying a fragmented post-independence society.”³³ Moreover, it also brought external, varied ideas into previously isolated rural areas, encouraging new ways of thinking.³⁴ Despite the fact radio was used to promote political ideology, which was in favour of traditional Irish music, people could also enjoy an assortment of American popular music. This genre included songs used in *Dancing at Lughnasa* such as 'Isle of Capri', made famous by Gracie Fields, Cole Porter's 'Anything Goes', or 'Dancing in the Dark.' Even though some people at the time would have held opinions similar to those of Kate, who complains at one point in the play that the radio “killed all the Christian conversation in this country”³⁵, de Valera, who was aware of the power of radio as a political instrument, gave many famous speeches in which he emphasised the correlation between the Irish nation and the Catholic church. Brown quotes an extract from de Valera's speech in a St. Patrick's day broadcast to the United States in 1935:

²⁹ Brown 147.

³⁰ Brown 150.

³¹ Brown 153.

³² Brown 153.

³³ Roche 82.

³⁴ Roche 82.

³⁵ Friel 51.

Since the coming of St. Patrick, fifteen hundred years ago, Ireland has been a Christian and Catholic nation. All the ruthless attempts made through the centuries to force her from this allegiance have not shaken her faith. She remains a Catholic nation.³⁶

The wireless set is one of the signs that “the Industrial Revolution had finally caught up in Ballybeg”³⁷. Other products of the industrial revolution are brought to Ballybeg by Gerry: he sells gramophones and arrives by motor car. Motor-cars really only became common for middle-class families in the 1930s as the outcome of technical developments abroad. (In 1931, there were 4455 new registrations of private motor vehicles. By 1936, this figure had risen to 8111 and in 1937, to over 10,000 registrations.)³⁸ Another example is Rose's interest in going to the movies. In the 1930s, an obsession with Hollywood films was common even in rural Ireland.³⁹

The Industrial Revolution has also negative impact on the lives of the Mundy sisters. Because of the opening of a mechanised glove factory, Rose and Agnes will lose their jobs as glove knitters and therefore their only income. Even though Chris applies for a job in the factory, as it is the only option left to her to try to provide for the family when Kate loses her job, she hates working there. She had very little choice but to apply for this job based on the limited working possibilities for women at the time. Lojek states that another typical profession for women was teaching. However, women were paid less than men and had to retire when they got married; male teachers, although less numerous, did not have the same constraints placed upon them in terms of earning power and career progression. Moreover, control over national schools was left in patriarchal, Catholic hands. Thus the parish priest can dismiss Kate when Father Jack's orthodoxy lapses.⁴⁰ Lojek sums up the situation for women in the 1930s in the following words:

The Irish political revolution seemed complete. A conservative social revolution was well under way. The industrial revolution was beginning. Geographic and cultural isolation from Dublin did not insulate Donegal from policies enacted in the capital, and the alliance between church and state produced legislation and cultural expectations particularly oppressive to women.⁴¹

The contemporary financial situation for many families at the time was quite

³⁶ Brown 151.

³⁷ Friel 46.

³⁸ Brown 153.

³⁹ Brown 153.

⁴⁰ Roche 85.

⁴¹ Roche 79.

bleak. De Valera's policies of promoting small-scale tillage farming and industrial development behind high tariff walls, reinforced by the Economic War, reflected the traditional nationalist goal of economic self-sufficiency.⁴² However his theory of self-sufficiency did not really work in practice. Brown states that as a consequence of this, emigration rates remained high (at a net figure of about 6 per 1000 of the population for the period 1926-1946, areas of Western Ireland suffering the most); most emigrants at the time went to England.⁴³ Even though emigration had lessened for a brief period in the first half of the decade, mostly because of the American depression, by the end of the 1930s the rate of emigration had accelerated once more.⁴⁴ The most common reasons for emigration were disenchantment with the social order and unemployment, and a large proportion of these emigrants were women.⁴⁵ In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, there are four examples of female emigration – apart from Agnes and Rose, Danny Bradley's wife and Bernie O'Donnell also emigrate, perhaps with more fortunate consequences.

Although the play is set in rural Ireland, Friel makes it clear that his characters are aware of the problems happening outside of Ireland. Thanks to Father Jack's mission, the sisters are familiar with some aspects of the way of life in Uganda. Connections with America are established chiefly by the radio – Gerry is compared to Fred Astaire and Maggie negatively compares herself to Ginger Rogers.⁴⁶ More serious political problems are also present in the play. It is mentioned that Kate has been involved in the War of Independence, in contrast to her brother's service with the British Army.⁴⁷ The Second Italo - Abyssinian War (1935–1936)⁴⁸ is hinted at in Rose's song about Abyssinia.⁴⁹ More importantly, The Spanish Civil War is discussed in the Mundy family because of Gerry's plan to join the International Brigade – not because of his conviction or sympathy for Republicans, but merely because he needs some kind of excitement in his life at the time. Kate, once again, disapproves of his

⁴² Connolly 608.

⁴³ Brown 151 – 152.

⁴⁴ Brown 151 – 152.

⁴⁵ Brown 151 – 152.

⁴⁶ Friel 17.

⁴⁷ Friel 6.

⁴⁸ R. Palme Dutt, *World Politics 1918-1936*. (New York: Random House, 1936) 253.

Internetarchive.org <<http://archive.org/details/worldpolitics191028102mbp>> 12 April 2013.

⁴⁹ Friel 2-3.

involvement in the war, where Irishmen are “fighting for godless communism.”⁵⁰ Chris corrects her: “For democracy, Kate.”⁵¹ Their argument reflects the general ideas about The Spanish Civil War in Ireland, which divided Irish political life, causing tensions between political parties and inducing Irishmen to fight on both sides.⁵² The struggle in Spain was perceived to be part of a worldwide conflict between Communism and Catholicism at the time. Thus, the nationalist side under Franco was supported by the Catholic bishops and by most of the Irish press and political parties. Fianna Fail, however, remained neutral. Irish men from the Irish Brigade fought on Franco's side under Eoin O'Duffy, whereas the Irish Republican Army supported the republican side in Spain and formed the Connolly Column of the International Brigade under Frank Ryan. While the Irish Brigade did not see much action and soon returned home disillusioned, those fighting in the Irish Republican Army were involved in serious fighting and casualties were high.⁵³

Apparently, the Mundy sisters do not live in their household in rural Ireland isolated from the outside world as it may seem at first, they are well aware of the political and social events which have a significant influence on their lives.

Although all the historical events discussed in this chapter so far refer to the 1930s, there is another time level present in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Michael, a seven-year-old boy in 1936, is a young man as some twenty or thirty years have passed since then. Even though Michael – narrator does not comment on the historical and social context of the present day, the audience who watch the performance some other ten or twenty years later are aware of the changes Ireland has undergone during the years. In 1990, the time of its first production Ireland experienced economic boom. Another significant change was also the position of women in the society. Lojek points out that

Women were suddenly highly visible in Irish politics, especially when Mary Robinson was elected President in 1990 shortly after the play's premiere. Debate about legal and constitutional restrictions on women, to which *Dancing at Lughnasa* contributed, was part of the climate for her election⁵⁴

Lojek also discusses the position of unwed mothers in the 1980s and the

⁵⁰ Friel 41.

⁵¹ Friel 41.

⁵² Connolly 550.

⁵³ Connolly 550.

⁵⁴ Roche 87.

1990s and emphasises the contrasts between extreme consequences of such position and the treatment of the same problem in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Lojek gives the example of “Kerry babies” case, in which “two (unrelated) murdered babies were found in close proximity in rural Kerry.”⁵⁵ The same year a teenage girl died under a statue of the Virgin, in labor from a concealed pregnancy in Longford.⁵⁶ As Lojek states, “*Dancing at Lughnasa* poses an alternative to the culture of cruelty toward unwed mothers and illegitimate children.”⁵⁷ Even though Chris is only nineteen when Michael is born, despite the Catholic prudery, the sisters do not send him to an orphanage. Friel makes it clear that the community interpret Michael as the shame of the family, however, the Mundy sisters surround him by their love and bring him up together. Father Jack also brings a different point of view on illegitimate children, claiming that women in Ryanga are “eager to have love-children.”⁵⁸

Other issue of the 1990s Friel discusses in *Dancing at Lughnasa* concerns Ireland's unique Catholicism.⁵⁹ Catholicism mainly restricts the Mundy Family – the Ballybeg priest, although he never appears on stage, seems to be utterly unsympathetic. When he finds out about Father Jack's going native, he dismisses Kate from the parish school, probably being well aware of the fact that this will result with the economic ruining of the family. The only positive influence the Church had on their lives was the acclaim of the family because Father Jack was regarded a local hero due to his mission in Uganda.⁶⁰ Lojek suggests, that the challenging of Catholicism in the play reflected the 1980s scandals which “rocked Irish Catholicism and decreased the authority of its priests.”⁶¹ The criticism of Catholicism apparent in this play is also connected with Friel's scepticism towards the Catholic Church, in Ireland, which will be mentioned in the following chapter.

3.2 The context of writing *Dancing at Lughnasa*

Late on a summer's evening in London in 1987, Brian Friel walked along the Thames Embankment with Tom Kilroy. The two playwrights had just left Britain's National Theatre,

⁵⁵ Roche 87.

⁵⁶ Roche 87.

⁵⁷ Roche 87.

⁵⁸ Friel 31.

⁵⁹ Roche 87.

⁶⁰ Friel 6 – 7.

where they had seen Friel's dramatization of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*. As they passed homeless men and women curled up in doorways and trash-filled alleys, the writers speculated about the lives of these unfortunate people. Friel said that he had two maiden aunts who ended up like that – destitute and abandoned in London. Just before World War II, they had suddenly left the family home in the tiny village of Glenties in Ireland, and never returned. Caught up by the story, Kilroy suggested Friel write a play about it.⁶²

Mel Gussow starts describing the genesis of *Dancing at Lughnasa* thus, and continues that “Back in Ireland, Friel took his friend's advice.”⁶³ However, Friel himself had already been thinking about writing a play inspired by his childhood memories.⁶⁴ *Dancing at Lughnasa* is not an autobiography, but, as Gussow puts it, “Friel uses autobiography as a taking-off point for art with a far more universally relevant purpose.”⁶⁵ Yet, there are certain features that reveal the connection between the play and Friel's life. Firstly, he dedicated the play “in memory of those five brave Glenties women”⁶⁶. Gussow also points out that “out of piety for his mother and her sisters, each of the characters bears the first name of the real-life model on which she is based.”⁶⁷ Moreover, as James Delingpole mentions, the surname of the Mundy sisters' real life equivalents was McLoone, which is related to the Irish word for Monday.⁶⁸ Furthermore, in 1936, Friel was seven years old, the same age as Michael. Besides, although Friel denies that the model for the fictional town of Ballybeg is Glenties, anyone from Glenties would claim the contrary.⁶⁹ In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Friel focused on his characteristic themes such as dispossession, dreams of departure and lost illusions rather than on writing an autobiography or documentary of his life.⁷⁰ In the play, Friel also deals with Catholicism, of which he has always been sceptical and towards which he has always had ambivalent attitude. Friel says in interview with Desmond Rushe:

⁶¹ Roche 87 – 88.

⁶² Mel Gussow, “In Interview with Mel Gussow,” Christopher Murray, ed. *Essays, Diaries, Interviews: 1964-1999* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1999.) 139.

⁶³ Murray 139.

⁶⁴ Murray 139.

⁶⁵ Murray 139.

⁶⁶ Friel iv.

⁶⁷ Murray 139.

⁶⁸ Roche 79.

⁶⁹ James Delingpole, “How Dancing with Lughnasa Writer Put Glenties Squarely on the Map,” Paul Delaney, ed. *Brian Friel in Conversation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000) 228 – 229.

⁷⁰ Murray 139.

I suppose I'm a sort of practising lapsed Catholic. It's one of these attitudes I'm not prepared to defend, because I'm a volatile sort of person, and next week I could be crawling up Croagh Patrick on my knees. And I don't see any great contradiction in this either.⁷¹

Friel, although having been brought up in a Catholic background, is known for his scepticism towards and criticism of the Irish Catholic Church. In the same interview, he criticises the Church for its teaching about the afterlife and for its intervention into education.⁷² By setting his play in (and calling it after) the Lughnasa Festival and by his portrayal of Father Jack, Friel emphasises pre-Christian cultures in Ireland and the theme of conflict between Catholicism and paganism, which is central to the play. As James Delingpole states,

The title comes from a scene in which the sisters interrupt their household chores to break out into a wild and completely unexpected dance, as they celebrate a pagan Irish festival called Lughnasa. [...] How much of all this is autobiographical and how much is artistic licence has largely been a matter of speculation, because Friel is notoriously reluctant to discuss his work.⁷³

Delingpole continues by quoting a conversation with a local of Glenties, who claims that he never heard of the festival of Lughnasa and denies the experience of dancing round fires.⁷⁴ Riana O' Dwyer confirmed that the way Lughnasa is depicted in the play has more to do with Friel's artistic invention than with reality. For instance, the bonfires referred to in the play as Lughnasa fires were in fact connected with the Vigil of St. John, on June 23rd.⁷⁵ This Christian festival, with pre-Christian roots, is also known as Midsummer Eve and according to Emyr Estyn Evans, its celebration includes bonfires organized mainly on country crossroads. During the bonfires, young men could demonstrate their courage by jumping through the flames, the girls doing the same in the belief that they would “get married soon and have many children.”⁷⁶ These bonfires also prefigured the harvest, and were therefore connected with the fertility of the land: “Leaping is in folk tradition a widely approved method of making the crops grow high, and the fires, it is conjectured, were meant to encourage the sun, now at its turning point, to shine on through the

⁷¹ Murray 26.

⁷² Murray 26 – 27.

⁷³ Delaney 229.

⁷⁴ Delaney 229.

⁷⁵ Riana O'Dwyer in conversation with the author at the National University of Ireland, Galway, May 2009.

harvest.”⁷⁷ These customs resemble of those practiced by the people from the back hills in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Does this mean that Friel deliberately moved a custom of Midsummer Eve to the Lughnasa festival? In the articles about the Lughnasa Festival in the programme brochures for Irish productions⁷⁸ there is no mention of this festival including bonfires.⁷⁹ However in a publication entitled *The Year in Ireland*, Kevin Danaher describes many different forms of celebration of Lughnasa, depending upon the region. Apart from the custom of cooking a special festive meal prepared from the newly-gathered crop,⁸⁰ gatherings held at traditional sites such as a hill or mountain top, lake or river, were probably the main event of the festival. Danaher states that fires were also part of the tradition, for instance in County Limerick and in Laois-Offaly: ”there are all kinds of games and trials of strength, and in the evening they kindle big fires, and the young men run races round the fires, and the more daring of them leap over the fires.”⁸¹

The participants of the gatherings were mostly young people as the destination was usually a remote place, difficult to reach for elderly people or children.⁸² After reaching this place the participants usually spend the whole afternoon and evening there. There was eating, drinking, singing, playing musical instruments, dancing, and young men could also demonstrate their skill and strength in sport games and competitions.⁸³ Another widespread custom was the gathering of bilberries, which were “looked on as an earnest of the earth's fruitfulness and the bounty of deity.”⁸⁴ The bilberry picking was sometimes a good excuse for young people to meet up and turn this event into a social occasion they could enjoy together. The festival in general was often thought of as “a legitimate time for courting”⁸⁵ and for many young people it was an opportunity to find future husband or wife. Therefore it is not surprising that, as Kevin Danaher puts it, “As a sequel to these

⁷⁶ E. Estyn Evans, *Irish Folk Ways* (Mineola, N.Y. : Dover Publications, 2000) 274.

⁷⁷ Evans 274.

⁷⁸ The information for the programme were taken from *The Festival of Lughnasa* by Máire MacNeill

⁷⁹ Programme brochure for *Dancing at Lughnasa* produced by the Abbey Theatre Dublin 1990.

⁸⁰ Kevin Danaher, *The year in Ireland* (Cork; Minneapolis: Mercier Press, 1972) 167.

⁸¹ Danaher 170.

⁸² Danaher 170.

⁸³ Danaher 169 – 170.

⁸⁴ Programme brochure for *Dancing at Lughnasa* produced by the Abbey Theatre Dublin 1990.

⁸⁵ Evans 276.

chance meetings and mountain-top flirtations many weddings resulted.”⁸⁶

Another favourite place for gatherings were lakes and rivers, where apart from the above mentioned customs, “the driving of the cattle and horses into the water”⁸⁷ was practised. This custom was probably also connected with pre-Christian rituals, and was criticised by the clergy. People believed that the driving of the cattle and horses into the water would defend them against evils during the year. Lumps of butter were also thrown into the lake and river, which was supposed to guarantee that their cows will be productive of milk during the year.⁸⁸ The Lughnasa festival also included visiting blessed wells and other local shrines, organizing fairs, and foretelling the weather. As Danaher sums it up, even though the Lughnasa Festival was mostly connected with customs concerning the harvest, a result of its immense importance, there were some survivals of Celtic religious ceremonies, such as the offerings of fruit or “garlanding with flowers the largest pillar stone [...] in the great stone circle at Grange”⁸⁹. The setting of the play around the Lughnasa festival is thus significant to such a degree not only because it highlights the contrast between Catholicism and paganism and draws the parallel between harvest celebrations in Uganda and in Ireland, but also stresses the connection between the fertility of the land with the human nature of courting, getting married and having children – an aspect of life that the Mundy sisters were (mostly) deprived of.

After this digression which had to be made in order to summarize the most important features of the Lughnasa Festival, the rest of this subchapter will focus on the description of the exceptional place of *Dancing at Lughnasa* within Friel's cannon. *Dancing at Lughnasa* was the first play written independently of the Field Day Theatre Company since its establishment in 1980 and when it opened in April 1990 at the Abbey Theatre, it was for the first time in ten years that a new play by Friel was premiered there.⁹⁰ Many of Friel's earlier plays, such *The Enemy Within* (1962), *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964), *The Freedom of the City* (1973), *Volunteers* (1975), *Living Quarters* (1977) and *Aristocrats* (1979)⁹¹ were produced

⁸⁶ Danaher 169.

⁸⁷ Danaher 172.

⁸⁸ Evans 275.

⁸⁹ Danaher 177.

⁹⁰ Murray 202.

⁹¹ Francis Charles McGrath, *Brian Friel's (Post)Colonial Drama: Language, Illusion, and Politics* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press: 1999) xiii – xiv.

for the first time at the Abbey Theatre; however, because Friel was born in Omagh and grew up in Derry, he attempted to “break away from the Dublin theatre establishment”⁹² and thus decided to open his new play, *Translations* in Derry.⁹³ This play, which premiered in 1980, was the first production of the newly established Field Day Theatre Company and since then the world premieres of his new plays – *The Communication Cord* (1982), *Making History* (1988) and his version of *Three Sisters*, were all staged there.⁹⁴ As Ondřej Pilný puts it, “the original objective of the theatre company was to stage one play a year and give the opening performances in Derry, which was thus to become a third location, after Dublin and Belfast, where the idea of national identity was being (re)formulated.”⁹⁵ Due to the location of the Field Day and the fact that most of the directors “had first-hand experience of the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland,”⁹⁶ this conflict was often the main theme of the plays written for and staged at the Field Day. As Marilynn Richtarik puts it, Northern artists and intellectuals connected with Filed Day wanted to “respond to the unsettled political situation in the Province in the manner which seemed to them socially, morally and creatively responsible.”⁹⁷ Although Friel was the co-founder and one of the leading figures of the Field Day, after some time he felt an urge to start working independently again.⁹⁸ Mel Gussow states that

Within its first year with six directors, Friel was saying the effort to keep Field Day vibrant required of him “the suppression of the personality. „Although Friel would not resign from Field Day until February 1994, a process of disengagement had begun.”⁹⁹

Fintan O'Tool suggests that Friel finally resigned Field Day, because his involvement with this theatre on an artistic level simply cooled.¹⁰⁰ Gussow explains that Friel decided to leave Field Day because of “the need for independence, for

⁹² Marilynn Richtarik, “The Field Day Theatre Company,” Shaun Richards, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 2004) 191.

⁹³ Richards 192.

⁹⁴ Mc Grath xiii- xiv.

⁹⁵ Ondřej Pilný, *Irony and Identity in Modern Irish Drama* (Praha:Litteraria Pragensia, 2006) 105 – 106.

⁹⁶ Pilný 105.

⁹⁷ Richards 191.

⁹⁸ Delaney 202.

⁹⁹ Delaney 202.

¹⁰⁰ Fintan O' Toole, “Neither priest nor politician, but observer and playwright,“ *The Irish Times* 23 April 1990.

charting course free of gravitational forces that would impose a fixed orbit.”¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Delaney 202.

4. Significant productions of *Dancing at Lughnasa* in Ireland 1990-2007

4.1 The World Premiere at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin 1990

Declan Kiberd points out that because the premiere was allocated to The National Theatre, the themes which were common from Friel's plays produced in Field Day were painted “onto a truly national (and even global) canvas.”¹ According to him, *Dancing at Lughnasa* anticipated the expanded definition of Irishness, as well as “the willingness to reimagine the national condition which has characterised the politics of the decade, and also its poetry and prose.”² Therefore, he perceived staging *Dancing at Lughnasa* at the Abbey as an advantage in terms of introducing the essential topics to a wider, global, audience and in more general terms, re-defining Irish culture and Irishness in and outside of Ireland. Quite ironically, at the same time of the premiere of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, another memory play was produced; *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams, directed by Friel's daughter Judy at the Peacock. Another reason for staging the debut production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* at the Abbey, as Fintan O'Toole suggests, was that Friel's “family's relationship with the Abbey was strengthened”³ by this fact.

The director of the world premiere of *Dancing at Lughnasa* was Patrick Mason who first joined the Abbey Theatre as a director in 1977 and was Artistic Director of the Abbey from 1993 to 1999. The most famous productions that he directed at the Abbey and Peacock include *Our Town*, *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *The Factory Girls*, *The Gigli Concert*, *Too Late for Logic* and *The Silver Tassie*. Mason also directed six Tom MacIntyre works at the Peacock, including *The Great Hunger*, which toured to Belfast, London, Edinburgh, Paris, Leningrad, Moscow, Philadelphia and New York. Over the course of his career, Mason also directed plays at the Bristol Old Vic, the Gate Theatre, the Guthrie Theatre, Arhus Theater, Denmark and Chicago Shakespeare Theater. Mason has won

¹ Declan Kiberd, “*Dancing at Lughnasa* by Briel Friel (The Abbey Theatre, Dublin 3 June - 17 July, 1999),” *Irish Theatre Magazine* 1.3 (Summer 1999) 44.

² Kiberd 44.

many awards for his productions, including a Tony Award for best director for his production of *Dancing at Lughnasa*.⁴

Accordingly, Mason was already a very experienced and award-winning director at the time of directing *Dancing at Lughnasa*, whose most significant achievement was, however, yet to come. The most powerful evidence of the immense success of this production is without doubt the fact that, after it premiered at the Abbey, it toured to the Royal National Theatre and transferred to the Phoenix Theatre in the West End and the Plymouth Theatre, Broadway, and then toured throughout Britain and Australia.⁵ In fact, it ran for three years continuously, naturally with variations in the cast, in Dublin, London, Broadway, and elsewhere. In 1999, it returned to the Abbey as a part of the Friel Festival, with the same production team and a different cast. Moreover, Mason's production of the play won many awards, including Tony Awards for Best Play, Best Director and Best Supporting Actress.⁶ Most critics also gave the production rave reviews, praising mostly the acting, Joe Vanek's design and, of course, Mason's direction. However, not all reviewers were satisfied with some aspects the direction. David Nowlan, for example, sees both Mason's direction (although "sharp and brilliant"⁷), and Vanek's setting, as "too clinical"⁸. Mary O'Donnell criticises the slow pace of the opening section.⁹ As Patrick Lonergan states in his review of a later production of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Mason's direction was regarded by some "as an inspiring highpoint of recent Irish theatre, but by others as a sentimental betrayal of Friel's text."¹⁰ In terms of the premiere, the majority of critics were definitely of the former opinion. David Grant in *Theatre Ireland* writes:

Director Patrick Mason's most significant achievement has been to capitalise on this aspect of the play [the narrator inhibits the real world with the audience and looks on the action with them, which underlines the unreality of the characters], rather than let it undermine him. It would have been all too easy for the action, which is after all a projection of one man's

³ Fintan O' Toole.

⁴ "Artists-Patrick Mason," *Dublin Theatre Festival.com*.
<<http://dublintheatrefestival.com/artists/display.asp?m=&artistID=91>,
http://www.abbeytheatre.ie/people/view//patrick_mason/> 1 April 2013.

⁵ Programme brochure for *Dancing at Lughnasa* produced at the Abbey Theatre, 1999.

⁶ Programme brochure for *Dancing at Lughnasa* produced at the Abbey Theatre, 1999.

⁷ David Nowlan, "Dancing at Lughnasa, Abbey Theatre," *The Irish Times* 10 June 1999.

⁸ Nowlan.

⁹ Mary O'Donnell, "Private feeling at odds with public virtue," *The Sunday Tribune* 29 April 1990.

¹⁰ Patrick Lonergan, "Dancing at Lughnasa by Brian Friel. The Gate Theatre Dublin 24 February - 1

memory, to have a kind of misty, sentimental quality. In fact, a superb set of rugged and carefully detailed performances ensure that we are given a very direct and uncompromising picture of the people and ideas that give substance to the play.¹¹

David Grant also writes about Mason's great idea to develop “a kind of heightened ordinariness, where everyday action assumed the status of ritual”¹²:

Kitchen chores and the knitting of socks were acted out with distinctive precision. Each character was firmly drawn in such a way as to fall between naturalism and the kind of theatrical boldness Mason has achieved so well before. The result was that the fullness of Friel's characters were given life, but we were always aware that we were seeing the action at one remove, through the mind of the narrator.¹³

Derek West emphasises, that the production success was based mostly on the actresses' performances: “Whatever Friel's intentions, the major achievement of Patrick Mason's production lies in the powerful representation of the women.”¹⁴

Most reviews praised both the individual performances as well as the great acting in ensemble. Although some critics admitted, that the male roles were more complicated and challenging, most of them agreed that the actresses who played the Mundy sisters were the most important. Grant points out: “The challenge to the actors of having to realise such complex characterisations was well met. The women in particular each succeeded in asserting their different natures.”¹⁵ Hasset also praises the special performances, based on the credible portrayal of the “well sculpted characters”¹⁶ by the actors. According to him, “each performance is an integral part of this wholly satisfying evocation of a family past which will have so many echoes for those thousands who will see *Dancing at Lughnasa* now and into the next century.”¹⁷

The only actor whose performance was not evaluated highly by Grant was Paul Herzberg, who “as Michael's wayward father, adopted a very mannered approach that was perhaps overly stylised and so was at odds with the overall delicacy of the production's tuning.”¹⁸ On the other hand, the mostly praised actress was Anita Reeves, who played Maggie. She was awarded a Tony Award for Best

May 2004,” *Irish Theatre Magazine* 4.19 (Summer 2004) 57.

¹¹ Richard Pine, David Grant and Derek West, “*Dancing at Lughnasa*,” *Theatre Ireland* 22 (May 1990) 9 – 10.

¹² Grant 9.

¹³ Grant 10.

¹⁴ West 11.

¹⁵ Grant 10.

¹⁶ Declan Hasset, “Master Craftsman weaves a spell,” *Cork Examiner* 26 April 1990.

¹⁷ Hasset.

Supporting Actress and nominated for an Olivier Award. O'Donnell writes about her performance: "Maggie is played by Anita Reeves in what is one of the evening's outstanding performances: Like a full-blooded, lusty pagan, Reeves operates with a subtlety and fire which is well-gauged and at times downright brilliant."¹⁹

The role of Father Jack is also usually considered to be very complicated. Barry McGovern's performance obviously won critical acclaim. O' Donnell writes: "Barry McGovern's portrayal of Jack is – like Reeves – subtle, but richly exciting, undoubtedly one of the year's finest performances."²⁰ Grant writes about McGovern's performance: "Barry McGovern, as the eccentric priest, had the even harder task of presenting someone extraordinary and erred, perhaps on the side of naturalism, though this was still an impressive piece of stylistic conjuring."²¹ According to Grant, another great success was Gerard McSorley in the role of Michael, who: "had to say the lines of his infant and non-existent self so as to maintain the flow of the scene, but without actually involving himself in it."²² Grant claims that he succeeded in justifying "the length of the narrative sections by the quality of his delivery."²³

One of the highlights of the production was definitely the powerful scene of the sisters' dance. What Armitstead appreciates is that during this "frenzy of stamping and skipping"²⁴, each of the sisters retains her "eccentric individuality"²⁵:

The prim jigging of Frances Tomelty's schoolma'amish Kate contrasts with the inelegant earthiness of Anita Reeves' Maggie, the unstructured, childish high-kicking of Brid Ni Neachtain's Rose sets off the sweet neatness of Brid Brennan's Agnes and the ripe sensuality of Catherine Byrne's Chris.²⁶

The great success of the dance scene must be also credited to the choreographer, Terry John Bates. In this production he succeeded to give "life to the moments that depend on the suspension of language and the revelation of emotion through movement."²⁷ It must be pointed out, that there were many such moments in this production of *Dancing at Lughnasa*. This is not only the case of the dance in the

¹⁸ Grant 10.

¹⁹ O'Donnell.

²⁰ O'Donnell.

²¹ Grant 10-11.

²² Grant 10.

²³ Grant 10 - 11.

²⁴ Claire Armitstead, "Dancing at Lughnasa. Abbey Theatre, Dublin," *Financial Times* 27 April 1990.

²⁵ Armitstead.

²⁶ Armitstead.

²⁷ West 11.

first act, or Maggie's occasional dancing, but also “the seductive moves of Gerry that draw the sisters into his charms.”²⁸

Most reviews of the premiere writes enthusiastically about the set design of Joe Vanek, who has been designing in Ireland since 1984 and is closely associated with the plays of Brian Friel. Nominated for two Tony Awards for his set for *Dancing at Lughnasa*,²⁹ Joe Vanek was the Director of Design at the Abbey Theatre (under Patrick Mason) from 1994 – 97 and major plays he designed there included works by Frank McGuinness, Tom Kilroy, Tom MacIntyre, Tom Murphy, and Hugh Leonard.³⁰ Apart from his designs for the Abbey, Vanek has designed for the West End Theatre, London; the Young Vic; The Gate Theatre, Dublin; the Gaiety Theatre; Druid Theatre Company and the Lyric Theatre, Belfast. He also designed Ken Hill's *Phantom of the Opera* in San Francisco, which won two Critics Circle Awards for the West Coast production.³¹

The most remarkable part of Joe Vanek's set seems to be “the hillside of golden ripe wheat, dotted with the red of the wild poppy flower”³². West analyses this feature of the set:

This superbly executed field, apparently the designer's invention, is commanding, mesmerising – verging on the obtrusive – as if Vanek had an urge to translate a Monet painting onto the stage. The published text makes no mention of it and yet the barley forms more than a three-dimensional backdrop. It is a constant visual presence, an attendant image of fertility, growth and, most poignantly, the promise of a fulfilment that is elusive and best fitting for the main characters.³³

This backdrop seems not only to symbolise the harvest, “fertility, growth and the promise of a fulfilment”³⁴ but also creates a special atmosphere in which the tragic fates of the Mundy family are wreathed in the golden glare. West claims that even though the setting is naturalistic in the way it uses the details such as the turf stack, the range, the iron, enamel jugs and buckets, it is “frequently bathed in a summer light”³⁵, which is a “largely successful attempt to render atmosphere rather

²⁸ West 11.

²⁹ “Designer, Joe Vanek,” <<http://www.rosstheplay.com/creative/designer-joe-vanek>> 21 March 2013.

³⁰ “Designer, Joe Vanek,” <<http://www.rosstheplay.com/creative/designer-joe-vanek>> 21 March 2013.

³¹ “Designer, Joe Vanek,” <<http://www.rosstheplay.com/creative/designer-joe-vanek>> 21 March 2013.

³² Declan Hassett, “Master Craftsman weaves a spell,” *Cork Examiner* 26 April 1990.

³³ West 11.

³⁴ West 11.

³⁵ West 11.

than fact.”³⁶ According to West, in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Friel “has called upon the resource of theatre in a more comprehensive manner than he has ever done before – particularly through visual images, tableaux, light, sound and movement.”³⁷ Therefore it had to be very challenging for the designer to cope with those images and incorporate them into his set, which Joe Vanek managed excellently. Even though Derek West mostly praises the design, he is also aware of its drawbacks. He thinks, that by interposing elements which unsettle the spectator (the field is boxed in by high, plain flats; the path through the barley is reached by an odd, clearly defined doorway)³⁸, together with Michael's sardonic view of his past, a detachment is created. This detachment “places nostalgia at arm's length, but also [...] distracts from the full tragic impact of the sisters' lives.”³⁹

In an article for *Theatre Ireland*, 'In Search of Ballybeg', Joe Vanek recalls his experience of designing *Dancing at Lughnasa*, not only for the original production at the Abbey but also its variations in different venues, which he describes as “a constantly evolving process – always challenging, always enjoyable and certainly the most regarding experience of my career.”⁴⁰ It could be stated that Joe Vanek's sets constantly evolved throughout the many productions. He had to re-think a touring version of *Dancing at Lughnasa* capable of playing the major large and small venues.⁴¹ The most problematic issue seemed to be the adjustment of the wheat field for different venues. Vanek himself considered the wheat field “the touchstone for the production”⁴². He states that most of the audiences understood it correctly as “a symbol of harvest, growth and promise, and golden memories of time past.”⁴³ He is glad that, luckily, most of the audiences did not perceive it as a real object in a real place, because, as he admits, he did not “recall seeing much in the landscape [in Glenties] that would support a towering wheat field.”⁴⁴ At the end of his article, Joe Vanek comments on his cooperation with Patrick Mason and also on coping with creating design for a Brian Friel play: “Working with Patrick Mason, one has learned

³⁶ West 11.

³⁷ West 11.

³⁸ West 11.

³⁹ West 11.

⁴⁰ Joe Vanek, “In Search of Ballybeg,” *Theatre Ireland*, 31 (summer 1993) 10.

⁴¹ Vanek 11.

⁴² Vanek 11.

⁴³ Vanek 11.

⁴⁴ Vanek 11.

the power of simple, eloquent statements, and certainly, given the brilliance of Brian's writing, at all times one strives to serve it with just enough to trigger it off, but never to overwhelm.”⁴⁵

Since this was the world premiere of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, it is natural, that many reviews included commentaries on the play itself. In terms of critical reception of the text, the opinions of the critics differed. In two reviews, the text was not accepted without reservation. Although Desmond Rushe appreciates that the writing is “elegant and rich, and is spiced with a brittle humour,”⁴⁶ he argues that “In purely theatrical terms, the play is a disappointment: it is far from being vintage Friel.”⁴⁷ Otherwise, according to him, Mason's direction and the excellent acting are the strong points of the production.⁴⁸ He finishes his review with the expressive words: “What is lacking is dramatic meat in Mr. Friel's many-layered sandwich.”⁴⁹ David Grant also points out problematic aspects of Friel's text, which he sees in experimenting with new ways of storytelling in the theatre. Even though he thinks that “as an impressionistic presentation of a particular 1930's County Donegal world, it is unquestionably a triumph”⁵⁰ and as “an assertion of Friel's consummate command of cadence and language, it is a joy to listen to”⁵¹, he believes that “as a piece of drama, it fails fully to integrate the narrative sections and the enacted episodes.”⁵² On the other hand, the majority of reviewers praise the text uncritically. David Nowlan writes:

Dancing at Lughnasa [...] uses music and memory, narration and action, religion and ceremony, tradition and secularism, romance and irony, wireless and housekeeping, to evoke a past time with resonances that echo into the present and beyond. With threads as diverse as these, Mr. Friel has woven one of the richest dramatic fabrics of his illustrious writing life.⁵³

Hasset adds: “Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*, as interpreted by director Patrick Mason with a set by Joe Vanek at the Abbey, is a seamless weave of aural

⁴⁵ Vanek 11.

⁴⁶ Desmond Rushe, “Many-layered sandwich – but it lacks real meat,” *Irish Independent* 25 April 1990.

⁴⁷ Rushe.

⁴⁸ Rushe.

⁴⁹ Rushe.

⁵⁰ Grant 11.

⁵¹ Grant 11.

⁵² Grant 11.

⁵³ Nowlan.

and visual recall by the master craftsman.”⁵⁴ Hassett continues that this is “A play which should not be missed at the Abbey or wherever it will play in the future.”⁵⁵ West concludes enthusiastically: “*Dancing at Lughnasa* weaves a spell. It reverberates with sounds and images, music and words. It taps a submerged area of human experience, through beauty, warmth and a piercing sense of human frailty.”⁵⁶

4.2 The First Abbey Theatre Production on Tour

After the successful premiere at the Abbey Theatre, the production was transferred to the Lyttleton Theatre at the National Theatre in London in October 1990. After a three month run, the first revival was in Dublin in January 1991. The production was then moved to the Phoenix Theatre (March 1991) and later transferred to the Garrick Theatre in London, where it ran until February 1993. In the meantime, the play was produced on the New York stage by Noel Pearson in association with Bill Kenwright and Joseph Harris at the Plymouth Theatre. The premiere was on 24th October 1991 and was another great success.⁵⁷ Joe Vanek remembers:

Eliciting rave reviews and packed houses, this company (the third re-shuffle of cast in fact) notched up its Equity-permitted five months followed by an American cast including two U.S.A.-based Irish actors. An excellent and energetic company kept the play alive and well for a further seven months. However, with the Abbey departed, the charm seemed broken and American audiences proved hard to convince of the worth of the native company, so, despite all the acclaim, and although playing to respectable audiences, we finally closed almost a year to the day in October 1992.⁵⁸

There were three changes in the cast in the first revival in Dublin in 1991 – Rosaleen Linehan substituted for Frances Tomelty in the role of Kate, Gerry was played by Robert Gwilym instead of Paul Herzberg and the role of Jack, who was originally played by Barry McGovern, was now played by Alec McCowen.⁵⁹ It is also interesting to compare the two programme brochures of the original production of

⁵⁴ Hassett.

⁵⁵ Hassett.

⁵⁶ West 11.

⁵⁷ Vanek 10.

⁵⁸ Vanek 10.

⁵⁹ Programme brochure for *Dancing at Lughnasa* produced at the Abbey Theatre, 1990.

Dancing at Lughnasa and the 1991 revival.⁶⁰ The first obvious change was the graphic design. Whereas the title page of the 1990 programme was decorated only by a frame with images symbolising the Abbey Theatre, or theatre in general, the 1991 revival programme depicted a painting imitating a famous photograph from one of the most discussed and remembered scenes – the sisters' dance scene. On the first four pages of the programme for the latter production, the audience could read about the success the production acclaimed in London. Apart from a reprint of an article by Benedict Nightingale from *The Times* and extracts from various reviews, an important observation about the foreign productions of Brian Friel's plays and Irish drama in general is made on the first pages of the programme:

Over ten years ago, Brian Friel made clear his determination to win the freedom for the Irish theatre to speak to its own audience first and thereafter to the rest of the world. With *Dancing at Lughnasa* the belief that what could move an Irish audience could equally move any other audience has been triumphantly vindicated. The same production by the Abbey which was acclaimed in Ireland has been hailed in its recent run at the British National Theatre in London as probably (and for many certainly) the theatrical event of the year.⁶¹

4.3 *Dancing at Lughnasa* at the Lyric Theatre, Belfast, 1996

Even though Conall Morrison's production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* from the Lyric Theatre Belfast from 1996 remains somewhat of a mystery and few relevant materials were available, it would be an omission not to include a short chapter about it in this thesis. Conall Morrison's production was important also because it was the first time this play was staged independently of Abbey, with an entirely different cast and production team. Unfortunately, to obtain any materials and information about this production was rather difficult, and the multiple attempts to find relevant reviews or analysis were unsuccessful. Surprisingly, even after research at the Linen Hall Library, Belfast where the archive of the Lyric Theatre is housed, the only material gained was the programme brochure.⁶² No reviews, photographs, posters, not to mention any material about recording of the production or other sources, were found. Looking for reviews in newspapers from 1996 was also futile, as was searching the

⁶⁰ Programme brochures for *Dancing at Lughnasa* produced at the Abbey Theatre, 1999 and 1991.

⁶¹ Programme brochure for *Dancing at Lughnasa* produced at the Abbey Theatre, 1999.

⁶² Programme brochure for *Dancing at Lughnasa* produced at Lyric Theatre, Belfast, 1996.

Internet. Therefore there is not much that could be written about the production itself; however a few interesting facts in terms of the context and the cast were gleaned, which should not be omitted.

Although the following opinion cannot be supported with quotations from reviews, it could be assumed that the production was very well casted. All the members of the company were either experienced stage or film actors or young highly talented actors and actresses. Many of them had appeared in productions at famous Irish and international theatres, and also had experience working on radio plays and other programmes for the BBC and RTE.⁶³ Interestingly, three members of the cast had previous experience with plays by Brian Friel. Niall Cusack, for instance, who played the role of Michael, previously appeared at the Lyric in *Volunteers* and *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* Roy Hanlon (Jack) and toured Ireland in 1980 with the world premiere of Brian Friel's *Translations*, playing Jimmy Jack. Nuala Hayes, who played the role of Kate, the oldest sister, also played the main female role in the first Field Day production of *Translations*.⁶⁴

Despite the fact Conall Morrison was only thirty years old when he directed *Dancing at Lughnasa* at the Lyric Theatre, he was already an experienced director with several successful productions and projects to his credit. Before directing *Dancing at Lughnasa* at the Lyric, he lived in Edinburgh, where he directed numerous plays, studied for a drama degree in Liverpool, and worked on the Open House Theatre Project in Dublin.⁶⁵ He has directed at the Royal National Theatre, London⁶⁶, the Lyric Theatre, Belfast, Storytellers Theatre Company, Dublin and the Abbey Theatre. His productions at the Abbey include his own adaptation of Patrick Kavanagh's *Tarry Flynn* (also at the Lyttleton Theatre, Royal National Theatre), Brian Friel's *Freedom of The City*, Tom Murphy's *The House* and *A Whistle in The Dark*, and Marina Carr's *Ariel*. For the Lyric Theatre Belfast he has directed, apart from *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* and Tom Murphy's *Conversations on a Homecoming*. His more recent productions for the Lyric include John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, (2012) and *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller, which won Morrison a nomination for an Irish Times

⁶³ Programme brochure for *Dancing at Lughnasa* produced at Lyric Theatre, Belfast, 1996.

⁶⁴ Programme brochure for *Dancing at Lughnasa* produced at Lyric Theatre, Belfast, 1996.

⁶⁵ Programme brochure for *Dancing at Lughnasa* produced at Lyric Theatre, Belfast, 1996.

⁶⁶ Programme brochure for *Dancing at Lughnasa* produced at Lyric Theatre, Belfast, 1996.

award for Best Director in 2011.⁶⁷ His own plays include *Rough Justice*, *Green*, *Orange* and *Pink* and *Hard to Believe*, which was performed in the Czech Republic in 1995.⁶⁸

4.4 *Dancing at Lughnasa* – revival at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin 1999

Having gained critical and public acclaim in London, New York and around the world, *Dancing at Lughnasa* eventually returned to the Abbey Theatre. The second production opened on 9th June 1999 and was once again directed by Patrick Mason. And once again the set was designed by Joe Vanek, the lighting designer was Trevor Dawson and the choreographer was Terry John Bates.⁶⁹ The cast, on the other hand, had changed completely. The only exception to this was Anita Reeves, who created the role of Maggie in the original production and brought it to the Royal National Theatre and the West End, where she was nominated for an Olivier Award and received the Plays and Players Award for Best Supporting Actress.⁷⁰ This time the production was staged as part of Friel Festival, an event in honour of Brian Friel's seventieth birthday. Other productions from the Friel Festival included The Abbey's production of *The Freedom of the City*, which was presented in The Lincoln Centre Festival in New York, and Peacock productions of *Living Quarters* and *Making History*. There was also an exhibition at the National Library, curated by the National Theatre Archives along with other various literary and educational events and activities.⁷¹

The fact that *Dancing at Lughnasa* was revived for this occasion is further proof of its immense success. However, because it was not now a world premiere of a brand new play, the audience was deprived of some of the highlights of the original

⁶⁷ Terry Blain, "Conall Morrison Directs *The Playboy of the Western World*," *Culture Northern Ireland.org*. 30 August 2012.

< <http://www.culturenorthernireland.org/article/5184/conall-morrison-directs-the-playboy-of-the-western-world>> 16 March 2013.

⁶⁸ "Conall Morrison," *Abbey Theatre.ie*. <http://www.abbeytheatre.ie/people/view/conall_morrison> 13 March 2013.

⁶⁹ Programme brochure for *Dancing at Lughnasa* produced at the Abbey Theatre, 1999.

⁷⁰ Programme brochure for *Dancing at Lughnasa* produced at the Abbey Theatre, 1999.

⁷¹ Programme brochure for *Dancing at Lughnasa* produced at the Abbey Theatre, 1999.

production. Declan Kiberd writes:

By now the status of the original Abbey rendition is legendary and the fear of invidious comparisons might have deterred a lesser talent. That golden moment in Irish theatrical history when the five Mundy sisters were transformed into dervishes by “Marconi's voodoo” will never burst upon audiences with quite the shock of recognition which it evinced on its opening night in 1990. And, in the years between, there has been *Riverdance*.⁷²

However, the return of *Dancing at Lughnasa* was still “the most hotly-anticipated show of the year.”⁷³ Many critics agreed that second time round, Mason's direction focused more on some of the darker aspects of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, such as the sisters' emotional isolation and the psychology of the characters.⁷⁴ However, this emphasis on the darker aspects of the play did not change it into a bleak tragedy, tragic tone being balanced by the comical aspects of the play. Declan Kiberd admits that “the darker implications of the play are now more apparent”⁷⁵, but states that “they are offset by a wonderfully comic performance by Anna Healy as Maggie Mundy.”⁷⁶ Another critic, Jocelyn Clarke, appreciates that even though the play is a dark play with an atmosphere of nostalgia, it does not lapse into “easy sentiment”⁷⁷. Kiberd values the revival over the original production:

Patrick Mason's new version achieves a singular effect. The distortion and rage which Friel places in balance against the bodily energy and celebration are fully manifested, perhaps for the first time, in a quality production, and the moment allows for a return to the more manic potentials of the native dancing tradition, away from *Riverdance's* blander, commodified pleasures.⁷⁸

According to Mary Carr, the main focus of “Mason's assured direction”⁷⁹ is on “the clash between Jack's primitive beliefs and his elder sister Kate, in particular's, fierce piety.”⁸⁰ Even though this struggle is often a source of comedy in the play, “the unyielding remnants of pre-Christianity in the Ballybeg back hills echo less manageable forces which are also expressed in the sisters' wild and famous dance

⁷² Declan Kiberd, “*Dancing at Lughnasa* by Brian Friel (The Abbey Theatre, Dublin 3 June – 17 July, 1999)” *Irish Theatre Magazine* 1.3 (1999) 41.

⁷³ Anonymous, “*Dancing at Lughnasa*. The Abbey Theatre,” *In Dublin* 17-30 June 1999.

⁷⁴ Jocelyn Clarke, “Thanks for the memory,” *The Sunday Tribune* 13 June 1999.

⁷⁵ Kiberd 41.

⁷⁶ Kiberd 41.

⁷⁷ Clarke.

⁷⁸ Kiberd 41.

⁷⁹ Mary Carr, “Well worth another dance. *Dancing at Lughnasa*. The Abbey,” *Evening Herald* 10 June 1999.

⁸⁰ Carr.

sequence.”⁸¹ The famous dance scene is, once more, a recurring theme in many reviews. While in the case of the first production, this scene was usually perceived as one of the highlights, often overshadowing other moments from the production, in the case of the revival, the sisters' dance might have been a disappointment for some people. According to Clarke, in the original production, “the dance arrived suddenly and violently, a joyously triumphant moment of physical and sexual liberation which took the audience's breath away with its extraordinary visceral intensity.”⁸² Clarke believes that this was the defining image of the production for many spectators. Apparently, in the case of the revival, the famous scene was not as powerful as the audience might have expected. This is probably, as Clarke argues, because the audience was aware of the great success of the premiere, and therefore awaited much more. Clarke describes the scene as a “sentimentalised image of five women dancing [...] which fails to challenge its audience's expectations.[...]”⁸³ Still, the audience perceive this wrongly as “the emotional climax of the play only to be surprised that there is so much left to go, so much left unresolved.”⁸⁴ As the result of this, the audience was disappointed because the play was very different from what they remembered. Clarke concludes:

In spite of committed performances from the ensemble cast [...] and Mason's controlled direction, the Abbey's production revisits rather than rediscovers *Dancing at Lughnasa*, and is bewitched by its past rather than released by its presence - as an act of theatre now rather than then.⁸⁵

Most critics agreed that “all of the acting was of a high standard”⁸⁶. And even though it was noted in one review that some of the actors were not as experienced as the cast from the original production, the critic believed that the ensemble would after a few more performances match their colleagues.⁸⁷ David Nowlan, for example, writes: “The new cast on this occasion may take a few more performances to get a full grip on the unspoken nuances that are in the piece, but all the basics are already there that will make this entirely possible.”⁸⁸ In terms of individual actresses, Anita

⁸¹ Carr.

⁸² Clarke.

⁸³ Clarke.

⁸⁴ Clarke.

⁸⁵ Clarke.

⁸⁶ Kiberd 41.

⁸⁷ Carr.

⁸⁸ David Nowlan, “*Dancing at Lughnasa*, Abbey Theatre,” *The Irish Times* 10 June 1999.

Reeves received probably the most attention, having created “the original raunchy and irrepressible Maggie.”⁸⁹ In this production she was cast as Kate, “the prim and proper schoolteacher.”⁹⁰ Nowlan thinks that Reeves was not as prim in her characteristics as had been Frances Tomelty in the original production. According to him, “this subtly alerts the fulcrum around which the other sisters lever the action without, for one moment, disturbing the validity of the family relationships.”⁹¹ Another critic, however, believes that Reeves was so brilliant that she deserved a second award for her performance in the role of Kate.⁹² The other actresses seem to have given equally outstanding performances. To use the words of the critics, in the role of Maggie, Anna Healy gave an “immensely strong and effective performance”⁹³, Chris was played “with vulnerability and confidence by Ali White”⁹⁴, and Agnes was played “with firm commitment”⁹⁵ by Jane Brennan. Nowlan also praises Lynn Cahill, who played simple-minded Rose “with infectious ebullience”⁹⁶, although yet another critic, Emer O’Kelly, missed the “mischief that is so much part of Rose’s clouded mind”⁹⁷ in this portrayal of Rose. The two critics that mentioned Steven Elliott, in the role of Gerry, did not agree on his performance. Whereas Nowlan states that Elliott plays his role with “choreographic panache”⁹⁸, according to O’Kelly, Elliott’s Gerry is “utterly without even the greasy charm that laid such successful siege to Chrissie’s innocence.”⁹⁹

Evidently, Des Cave was very successful in the role of Father Jack. O’Kelly voices the opinion that Cave “recreates the best of all Father Jacks - mildly anxious, totally accepting, and drifting through a world of lost paradise.”¹⁰⁰ Other critics write that Cave plays Father Jack with “an air of careful and compelling confusion”¹⁰¹ and “teases us with the idea that Fr Jack may not be as deranged as his sisters need to

⁸⁹ Nowlan.

⁹⁰ Nowlan.

⁹¹ Nowlan.

⁹² Colin Kerr, “The Friel Thing,” *News of the World* 13 June 1999.

⁹³ Nowlan.

⁹⁴ Nowlan.

⁹⁵ Nowlan.

⁹⁶ Nowlan.

⁹⁷ Emer O’ Kelly, “Doomed charm of most tender dance,” *Sunday Independent* 20 June 1999.

⁹⁸ Nowlan.

⁹⁹ O’Kelly.

¹⁰⁰ O’Kelly.

¹⁰¹ Nowlan.

assume.”¹⁰² Out of all the male roles, Michael is the most commented on in the reviews. Carr states that David Parnell plays Michael “with a boyish charm and without the hard-edge he usually has. Of all the performances this differs the most from earlier portrayals.”¹⁰³ Nowlan believes that David Parnell as Michael is “successfully dispassionate”¹⁰⁴. Even though he perceives Michael's detached view as an advantage, others see it as a drawback. O'Kelly, for instance, believes that because of Parnell's “emphatic detachment from his part in his aunts' last summer together,”¹⁰⁵ he fails to convince the audience that he is the man, “who would later search the doss-houses of London until he found what was left of his family.”¹⁰⁶ In his review, Kiberd focuses also on the formal aspects of this character:

He [Michael] knows that his version has more to do with atmosphere than fact, and that he will never recall things exactly as they were. David Parnell's Michael in the current Abbey version well captures that acceptance of self-limitation; his look is quizzical or amused when not downright different. This is important because some well-argued feminist readings of the play have treated Michael as if he were just another all-controlling macho framer. Yet the character is so far from omniscience or authority that, in this production anyway, we are more aware of him as the vulnerable seven-year-old on whom the sisters often eavesdrop than as a mature adult who looks back on them (and on his prior self). By far the most stunning and beautiful of Friel's formal arrangements here is the tension between Michael's narrative summaries (pacy, pithy and pungent) and the actual lives being lived in slow-mo by the sisters in the farmhouse.¹⁰⁷

It is clear from what has been already written, that the revival of *Dancing at Lughnasa* at the Abbey in 1999 gained a great critical and public acclaim. Most reviewers emphasize the strengths of the production. Kerr, who calls this production “an unforgettable theatrical experience”¹⁰⁸, believes that this staging of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, one of the great Irish plays, will be remembered “as one of the finest productions of Brian Friel's great work.”¹⁰⁹ He also writes that each element of the production is perfectly realised. Alongside Joe Vanek's design, he also praises “the superb choreography by Terry John Bates,”¹¹⁰ which he even compares to

¹⁰² Carr.

¹⁰³ Carr.

¹⁰⁴ Nowlan.

¹⁰⁵ O'Kelly.

¹⁰⁶ O'Kelly.

¹⁰⁷ Kiberd 42.

¹⁰⁸ Kerr.

¹⁰⁹ Kerr.

¹¹⁰ Kerr.

Riverdance: “Everyone will have their favourite moments and the brilliant dancing sequence at the end of the first act on opening night made *Riverdance* look positively tame.”¹¹¹ Mick Heaney states that the revival of Joe Vanek's design from 1990 and the direction of Patrick Mason “highlight the clarity of performances and charged subtleties of the text.”¹¹² According to Kelly, the production “retains most of the same doomed charm, the same portent of tragedy about to be realised, as it did in the original. Above all, it retains the terrible festering thread of tragedy already present in the yearning, unused lives of the Mundy sisters.”¹¹³ Nowlan believes that this re-production of the original version of *Dancing at Lughnasa* “revived all the warmth, all the energy, all the steel and the agony of the five Mundy spinster sisters, whose tale is told more in actions and reactions than in words.”¹¹⁴

4.5 *Dancing at Lughnasa* at The Gate Theatre, Dublin, 2004

In reviewing Joe Dowling's production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* at the Gate Theatre, Dublin, Patrick Lonergan states that since its premiere at the Abbey in 1990, *Dancing at Lughnasa* was produced more often than any other play at the theatre during the subsequent ten years. Moreover, on almost every occasion, the production was directed by Patrick Mason and the set was designed by Joe Vanek.¹¹⁵ Lonergan claims that Joe Vanek's design has become iconic. Even though Mason's direction was not universally perceived as flawless, it has doubtless been remarkably successful. Due to the immense success of the original production and its subsequent, equally popular transfers to London, New York and even Australia and Japan, it may have become difficult to direct *Dancing at Lughnasa* in an utterly new way. Furthermore, as Patrick Lonergan points out, “This overfamiliarity, together with the film version of *Lughnasa* and the influence of *Riverdance* on our perception of the play's famous dance scenes, have combined to blunt the play's impact.”¹¹⁶ Joe Dowling's production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* at Gate Theatre, Dublin, which

¹¹¹ Kerr.

¹¹² Mick Heaney, “*Dancing at Lughnasa*,” *The Sunday Times* 13 June 1999.

¹¹³ O'Kelly.

¹¹⁴ Nowlan.

¹¹⁵ Patrick Lonergan, “*Dancing at Lughnasa* by Brian Friel. The Gate Theatre Dublin 24 February – 1 May 2004,” *Irish Theatre Magazine* 4.1 (summer 2004) 57.

¹¹⁶ Lonergan 57.

premiered on 24th February 2004, was the first time *Dancing at Lughnasa* returned to Dublin, but with a new production team and cast. Lonergan sees the greatest value of Joe Dowling's production “in making *Lughnasa* strange again.”¹¹⁷

Joe Dowling (born 27 September 1948) has been the artistic director of the Guthrie Theater, Minneapolis since 1995 and is currently the longest serving director in the Guthrie's history. Before he moved to the USA, he had a long and successful theatrical career in Ireland. He became a member of the Abbey Company in 1968, and co-founded the Young Abbey, Ireland's first Theatre-in-Education group in 1970. He was Director of the Peacock Theatre from 1974- 1976 and became the youngest ever Artistic Director of the Abbey in 1978. In 1985, he became Director of The Gaiety Theatre, where he founded Ireland's premier drama school, the Gaiety School of Acting. Dowling has directed productions in Dublin, London, Washington DC, Stratford, Ontario, Montreal and New York. Among his acclaimed productions of Friel's plays belongs for example *Faith Healer*, which was staged at the Abbey in 1980, with Donal McCann in the title role. Dowling's more recent productions of Friel's plays include the American premiere of *The Home Place* as part of the 2007/2008 season at the Guthrie Theater, and *Faith Healer*, which he directed (and performed in) in 2009 to mark Friel's 80th birthday.¹¹⁸

Contrasting with the Abbey premiere, which opened with music and an atmosphere brightened by a set where the golden wheat field took pride of place, “gloom, isolation, and urgency dominated the unfolding action.”¹¹⁹ This was also emphasized by Michael's opening monologue, which was “delivered with a disconcerting, arrhythmic speed that disorientates the audience, stopping [them] from setting into the play.”¹²⁰ Lonergan believes that an important problem any director of *Dancing at Lughnasa* needs to solve is “how to present the tension between Michael's memories and the action on stage.”¹²¹ Lonergan states that

Dowling seems to have chosen to present a straightforward memory play: he has Michael relate emotionally to the action, and even bring him on stage for the dance scene (Friel's script emphasizes that Michael wasn't there.) And, significantly, the spotlight lingers on Michael

¹¹⁷ Lonergan 57.

¹¹⁸ “Joe Dowling,” *Abbey Theatre.ie*. <<http://www.abbeytheatre.ie/people/view/joe-dowling>> 14 March 2013.

¹¹⁹ Lonergan 57.

¹²⁰ Lonergan 57.

long after the lights have gone down on everyone else.¹²²

Lonergan further compares the original production from the Abbey with Dowling's production: "Whereas Patrick Mason's original production led audiences to think of *Lughnasa* as being about a middle-aged man's nostalgia, here we're being told that the play is about a middle aged man's sense of loss."¹²³ Lonergan is convinced, that "in both cases, the masculine aspects of the play are being given too much weight."¹²⁴ As a result of this, "Michael is unbalancing the play,"¹²⁵ despite Gowen's good performance.¹²⁶

As in the case of reviews of previous productions, reviewers of Dowling's production focus on the dance scene, which, as theatre critic Helen Meany puts it, "overshadows the play's profound sadness."¹²⁷ She appreciates, that Dowling's production "avoids presenting a gleeful bacchanalia – or intimation of Riverdance"¹²⁸, which would have turned the scene into kitsch: "Here the sisters' movements to the radio music are full of frustration and their roars have an angry, painful tone."¹²⁹

In his review Lonergan also focuses on the differences between the set of the original production and of the Gate production:

The Abbey premiere opened with music, its cast in tableau against an expansive set that was lit in a soft autumnal haze. Here we open with a darkened stage, the gloom of Rupert Murray' slighting creating a sense of familial warmth being threatened by an uncertain future. Robert Jones' set emphasizes the Mundy's isolation: the interior of their cottage is initially closed to us; beside it, a grass footpath disappears upwards. The only sound we hear is the voice of Peter Gowen who, as the play's narrator Michael, stands in a severe spotlight that underscores his distance from the action¹³⁰

Fricke writes about the set: "Robert Jones's set squeezes the family of six adults and a child into a tiny kitchen, and the gorse-covered hill behind adds to the

¹²¹ Lonergan 58.

¹²² Lonergan 58.

¹²³ Lonergan 58.

¹²⁴ Lonergan 58.

¹²⁵ Lonergan 58.

¹²⁶ Lonergan 58.

¹²⁷ Helen Meany, "Dancing at Lughnasa," *The Irish Times* 26 February 2004.

¹²⁸ Meany 29.

¹²⁹ Meany 29.

¹³⁰ Lonergan 57.

sense of claustrophobia.”¹³¹ It is apparent from the production photographs¹³² that the claustrophobic atmosphere is also achieved by the small kitchen, which is crammed with objects of everyday use. This set seems to be done with much more realistic detail than the original production from the Abbey. It also gives the impression of gloomy atmosphere which foreshadows the tragic fate of the sisters.

Even though the critics' opinions on certain aspects of acting and some actors' performances differ, the cast is generally described very favourably. Fricker writes enthusiastically: “Joe Dowling's excellent casting starts with getting the ages right: the five unmarried sisters are tragically young.”¹³³ As a result of this, the spectators realize “the wasted potential of these vital women”¹³⁴, especially during the scene when Kate forbids her sisters to go to the harvest dance. Lonergan is of a similar opinion and calls everyone from the cast, with the exception of Ben Price (Gerry), excellent. According to him, “Ben Price's Gerry is disappointing, often ill-at-ease while singing and dancing.”¹³⁵ Since singing and dancing should come naturally for Gerry, and also be an essential part of his charm and his whole character, the actor's unease could have spoiled not only the character of Gerry but also the scenes when he dances with Chris and other sisters. Moreover, Fricker also describes Price's “strained performance”¹³⁶ as one of the missteps of the production.

Relatively ample space in the reviews is devoted to discussing John Kavanagh's portrayal of Father Jack. Almost all of the critics praise his performance in this complicated and challenging role. Lonergan writes: “John Kavanagh's Jack is mischievous but dignified: we understand why his sisters look up to him – and why they're frightened by him.”¹³⁷ Fricker praises Kavanagh for a believable performance.¹³⁸ Brian Lavery remembers one of the play's transcendent, wordless moments:

As Jack struggles to recover his forgotten English vocabulary, tragically strangled sounds

¹³¹ Karen Fricker, “*Dancing at Lughnasa*. Gate, Dublin,” *The Guardian.co.uk*. Guardian News and Media Ltd, 4 March 2004. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2004/mar/04/theatre2>> 22 August 2012.

¹³² “*Dancing at Lughnasa*,” *Gate Theatre.ie*. <<http://www.gatetheatre.ie/production/DancingatLughnasa2004#>> 13 March 2013.

¹³³ Fricker.

¹³⁴ Fricker.

¹³⁵ Lonergan 58.

¹³⁶ Fricker.

¹³⁷ Lonergan 58.

come from actor John Kavanagh's throat. In a wonderfully subtle scene, he taps two sticks together in a meditative rhythm, shuffling in a half dance with his eyes shut, while his sisters look on in horrified fascination”¹³⁹

Only Helen Meany does not speak complementarily of Kavanagh's performance: “Father Jack is also out on a limb. [...] Jack also has to carry many of the thematic burdens of the play, but John Kavanagh's studied performance is not convincing.”¹⁴⁰ Even though all of the actresses are mentioned and praised, Derbhle Crotty (Maggie), Dawn Bradfield (Rose) and Andrea Irvine (Kate) seemed to stand out. What Lonergan likes about Derbhle Crotty's portrayal of Maggie is, that even though “Maggie's humour can dominate the play, Crotty holds back, allowing other aspects of her character to surface.”¹⁴¹ According to Lonergan, Dawn Bradfield's characterisation of Rose “is so complete that she dominates the play.”¹⁴² He also praises Andrea Irvine, who “brilliantly humanises Kate, playing her lines without irony, so that her character now occupies the emotional core of the drama.”¹⁴³

Even if we do not take into account the one-word extracts from reviews which were published in both quality and tabloid newspapers, and are displayed on the website of the Gate Theatre¹⁴⁴ (“Flawless”, “Magnificent”, “Superb”, “Excellent”), the Gate production can be considered a very successful one. Even though Lonergan is critical that the “masculine aspects are being given too much weight”¹⁴⁵ and that “Michael is unbalancing the play”¹⁴⁶, he admits that he should not “overemphasize one flaw in an excellent production, in which Dowling and his cast persuasively show how much can be gained from continuing to explore Friel's troubling, and great, play.”¹⁴⁷ Fricker even prefers this production to the original one:

At last, a production that embraces the tragic heart of Brian Friel's late-career masterpiece. The famed 1990 Abbey production, revived in 2000, played the narrator Michael's reflections as rose-tinted nostalgia, but what he is remembering is a time of waste, loss and profound

¹³⁸ Fricker.

¹³⁹ Brian Lavery, “*Dancing at Lughnasa* (Gate Theatre Dublin),” *Irish Independent*, 12 Mar 2004.

¹⁴⁰ Meany.

¹⁴¹ Lonergan 58.

¹⁴² Lonergan 58.

¹⁴³ Lonergan 58.

¹⁴⁴ “*Dancing at Lughnasa*,” *Gate Theatre.ie*.

<<http://www.gatetheatre.ie/production/DancingatLughnasa2004#>> 13 March 2013.

¹⁴⁵ Lonergan 58.

¹⁴⁶ Lonergan 58.

¹⁴⁷ Lonergan 58.

cultural dissonance.¹⁴⁸

Unlike Lonergan, she thinks that “Dowling's masterstroke is the interpretation of adult Michael, agonised by memories: particularly in the second act, Peter Gowen's monologues are magnificently affecting.”¹⁴⁹ All of the shorter and less relevant reviews also speak well of the production, the only exception being Meany, who gives Dowling's production the unflattering adjective “lacklustre”¹⁵⁰

4.6 *Dancing at Lughnasa* at Lyric Theatre, Belfast, 2007

The Lyric's acclaimed production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* which ran from 1st June to 7th July 2007 was directed by Mick Gordon. This young director from Northern Ireland was already at the age of 28 regarded as one of the most exciting and talked-about directors in Britain.¹⁵¹ He was Associate Director at the Royal National Theatre, Director of the National's Transformation Season, and Artistic Director of London's Gate Theatre.¹⁵² He also worked with the Royal Court Theatre, the Oxford Playhouse, the Riverside Studios and several major theatres in Argentina.¹⁵³ Gordon is also the founding Artistic Director of On Theatre.¹⁵⁴ His awards include the Critics Circle Award for Most Promising Newcomer, and the Peter Brook Award for Most Outstanding Theatre.¹⁵⁵ Mick Gordon is also considered to be “one of Friel's choicest directors.”¹⁵⁶ Gordon's 1998 production of Brian Friel's *Volunteers* from London's Gate Theatre was, unlike the first production in Dublin in 1974, very successful. This could be proved by its occurrence at all the major Irish festivals – Dublin, Belfast and Friel.¹⁵⁷ Gordon's productions of Friel's plays after *Dancing at Lughnasa* include *The Home Place* (2009) and *Uncle Vanya* (2012), both from the Lyric Theatre, Belfast.

¹⁴⁸ Fricker.

¹⁴⁹ Fricker.

¹⁵⁰ Meany.

¹⁵¹ Karen Fricker, “Northern Star,” *Irish Theatre Magazine* 1.3 (summer 1990) 25.

¹⁵² “Artistic director Mick Gordon,” *On theatre.org.uk* <<http://www.on-theatre.org.uk/board.html>> 15 March 2013.

¹⁵³ Fricker 25.

¹⁵⁴ “Artistic director Mick Gordon,” *On theatre.org.uk* <<http://www.on-theatre.org.uk/board.html>> 15 March 2013.

¹⁵⁵ “Artistic director Mick Gordon,” *On theatre.org.uk* <<http://www.on-theatre.org.uk/board.html>> 15 March 2013.

¹⁵⁶ “Brian Friel's Uncle Vanya in Rehearsals,” *Lyrictheatre.co.uk* <<http://www.lyrictheatre.co.uk/news/specific/brian-friels-uncle-vanya-in-rehearsals>> 14 Mar 2013.

According to theatre critic Jane Coyle, *Dancing at Lughnasa* is more than just a play to Mick Gordon. She sees it as “the key to the door of his home”¹⁵⁸ and therefore believes that “[Gordon] has approached and directed it with every fibre of his being and, in the process, wrenches unimagined emotional responses from cast and audience alike.”¹⁵⁹ What another critic, Ian Hill, appreciates about Gordon's production is that he “knows his Friel and so, he does not, as many have done before, back away from the author's ability to capture almost palpable aroma of women's suppressed sexuality.”¹⁶⁰ According to Hill, this suppressed sexuality was the main theme in Gordon's production:

Mairead McKinley's mentally disadvantaged Rose does not run scared from the implications of inappropriate, but inevitable, lusts as Maggie sublimates through music-hall jokes, dance lyrics and Deborah Maguire's exhilaratingly perceptive choreography. Agnes's moral wrestling match is with her love-that-can-not-speak-its-name for Chris's wayward Gerry and once less than plain Kate struggles via a weakening grip of the old decencies. Young Chris, by useful contrast, is presented as an unusually free from guilt, for the period, unmarried Irish Catholic mother.¹⁶¹

Opinions diverge on Ferdia Murphy's set design. Whereas David Lewis claims that “Ferdia Murphy's set successfully evokes the Irish country kitchen of the 1930s, with turf-burning range, cold press and knick-knacked dresser,” according to Ian Hill, Ferdia Murphy's kitchen is not “overtly period.”¹⁶² Photographs of the set, available on the Lyric Theatre website¹⁶³, give the impression that the set was not only realistic but somehow hyperrealistic, especially the exterior – the garden with real-looking lawn and even more realistic sycamore tree. The hyperrealistic impression is further intensified by the lighting, which evokes real sunbeams shining through the branches of the tree. David Lewis further writes about the set: “The frustration of life indoors is contrasted well with the freedom of outdoors and the garden, with its spreading sycamore tree, simple seat and grass so green it hurts the

¹⁵⁷ Fricker 27.

¹⁵⁸ Jane Coyle, “*Dancing at Lughnasa*,” *The Stage.co.uk*, The Stage Media Company Ltd, 8 June 2007 <<http://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/review.php/17120/dancing-at-lughnasa>> 14 March 2013.

¹⁵⁹ Coyle.

¹⁶⁰ Ian Hill, “*Dancing at Lughnasa*. Brian Friel. Lyric Theatre, Belfast,” *British Theatre Guide.info*, David Chadderton 2013, June 2007 <<http://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/lughnasabelfast-rev>> 18 Feb 2013.

¹⁶¹ Hill.

¹⁶² Hill.

¹⁶³ “*Dancing at Lughnasa*. Brian Friel. Lyric Theatre, Belfast – Photographs,” *Lyrictheatre.co.uk*

eyes.”¹⁶⁴ Jane Coyle writes: “Ferdia Murphy's bewitching little round of a set divides between grassy fields, replete with all kinds of human possibilities, and the claustrophobia of the island-shape kitchen.”¹⁶⁵

The fact that this was one of Mick Gordon's first productions in Belfast after returning from England, where he became famous mainly for his credits in London's Gate Theatre, was assuredly one of the reasons that this production was awaited so enthusiastically. Moreover, Friel himself was supposed to watch over this new production.¹⁶⁶ However, pre-publicity for the production was likely further engendered by the appearance of screen star Gerard McSorley in the role of Father Jack.¹⁶⁷ Apart from his roles in famous films including *In the Name of the Father* (1993), *Braveheart* (1995), *Michael Collins* (1996), and primarily his lead role in *Omagh* (2004), for which he won an Irish Film and Television Award for Best Actor, Gerard McSorley has also a special connection with *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Not only had he created the role of Michael in the world premiere at the Abbey Theatre in 1990, but he also provided the voice of the narrator in the film version of *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1998), directed by Pat O'Conner.¹⁶⁸

There was, however, mixed reaction to his portrayal of Father Jack. Coyle describes his performance as “an engaging mixture of mischief and pathos.”¹⁶⁹ Hill criticizes him for “flirting too much with his role's comic possibilities.”¹⁷⁰ On the other hand, Hill admits, that it must be hard to avoid doing so “in an Ireland in which many of the audience still giggle at another nation's indigenous sexual customs.”¹⁷¹

No matter how alluring the presence of Gerard McSorley was for the audience, the production's success depends without doubt primarily on the performances of the actresses playing the five Mundy sisters. Stephen Price, a reviewer for *The Sunday Times* states:

The key to Brian Friel's masterpiece is making the Mundys feel like real sisters. Each of the five women represents a state of mind, and good actresses can bring them to life individually.

<<http://www.lyrictheatre.co.uk/photos.aspx?dataid=420160>> 15 March 2013.

¹⁶⁴ David Lewis, “Theatre Review: *Dancing at Lughnasa*,” *Culture Northern Ireland.org*, 12 October 2010 <http://www.culturenorthernireland.org/article.aspx?art_id=2005> 18 February 2012.

¹⁶⁵ Coyle.

¹⁶⁶ Hill.

¹⁶⁷ Lewis.

¹⁶⁸ Gerald McSorley <<http://www.gerardmcsorley.com/>> 1 April 2013.

¹⁶⁹ Coyle.

¹⁷⁰ Hill.

¹⁷¹ Hill.

But making them work as a family requires clever casting and direction. Mick Gordon hasn't missed a trick here. [...] The players deliver exemplary, well-measured performances, each one resisting the numerous opportunities to overdo it.¹⁷²

Lewis calls the Mundy sisters “the pulsating heart of the play”¹⁷³ and according to him, “the five actresses are entirely believable”¹⁷⁴, “wonderfully energetic”¹⁷⁵ and “all give terrific performances.”¹⁷⁶ As in the case of previous productions of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the highlight of the Belfast production seems to be the sisters' ecstatic dance in Act One¹⁷⁷, in which Coyle sees “absolutely spine-tingling catharsis”¹⁷⁸. Coyle also praises the actresses, who “deliver the thinly veiled heartache of their physical and psychological confinement with deeply moving truth and integrity.”¹⁷⁹ Rhyddian Jones in the role of Gerry Evans is also praised for endowing his character with “just the right amount of easy, superficial charm.”¹⁸⁰

Hill perceives this production as “another in a row of successful productions from The Lyric.”¹⁸¹ However, he also admits the weak points of the production, which he sees especially in the performance of Sean Sloan in the role of Michael in the final scene:

So does this production have a fault? Well yes. For who's to explain what Sean Sloan's uptight, buttoned-up Michael is up to, coming on stage and telling us the tale of his family's, the Mundys, fragmentation. If he's addressing us, the audience, directly as he does, who are we? Do Gordon and Sloan see him as a Faith Healer at a gathering of Families Anonymous? This critic is mystified, so when, in the play's final speech, once he's passed the mantra at the core of all this master storyteller's dramas, the words that remind us that [...] all memory is wilfully imperfect, many wished the curtain would fall before Sloan's speech tailed off into a now imperfect night.¹⁸²

With this single exception, however, all other critics write rave reviews about Gordon's production. One example for all could be Coyle's concluding words of praise:

¹⁷² Steven Price, “*Dancing at Lughnasa*,” *The Sunday Times* 17 June 2007.

¹⁷³ Lewis.

¹⁷⁴ Lewis.

¹⁷⁵ Lewis.

¹⁷⁶ Lewis.

¹⁷⁷ Lewis.

¹⁷⁸ Coyle.

¹⁷⁹ Coyle.

¹⁸⁰ Coyle.

¹⁸¹ Hill.

¹⁸² Hill.

With loving attention to Brian Friel's flawless text by a perfectly cast ensemble, the production plumbs the deepest, darkest depths of the Mundy sisters' domestic confinement in Ballybeg, while reaching far beyond to suck out the frustrated hopes, needs and desires of women all over Ireland.¹⁸³

¹⁸³ Coyle.

5. Significant productions of *Dancing at Lughnasa* in the Czech Republic 1993-2004

5.1 The Czech Premiere at Divadlo na Vinohradech, 1993

Divadlo na Vinohradech (Vinohrady Theatre) was built between 1905 and 1907 to reflect the economic flourishing of Vinohrady's townspeople. Since its opening, Divadlo na Vinohradech has also been considered a competition stage to The National Theatre in Prague. Nowadays it is perceived as a traditional theatre with a repertoire oriented to a more conservative middle class audience, whose more favoured plays have for instance been István Örkény's *Cats' play*, August Strindberg's *Kristina* or Georges Feydeau's *A Flea in Her Ear*. When actress Jiřina Jirásková became the director of Divadlo na Vinohradech in 1990, she followed the need for rejuvenation of the ensemble, and cast many new actors and actresses, including four members of the cast of *Dancing at Lughnasa* - Kateřina Brožová, Lucie Juříčková, Marta Vančurová and Jiri Čapka.¹

Dancing at Lughnasa, as translated by Ota Ornest², was discovered for Divadlo na Vinohradech by its literary manager Václav Königsmark, who generally favoured new titles.³ In an interview, the actress Daniela Kolářová (the first Czech Maggie) remembers that she liked Königsmark's dramaturgy for its "courageous vision".⁴ Many reviewers also appreciated that Divadlo na Vinohradech had effectively staged a new play, just three years after its acclaimed world premiere.⁵ It was the first time Brian Friel play appeared on the Czech stage.⁶

Since *Dancing at Lughnasa*, along with any other of Friel's dramas, was utterly unknown to Czech theatre-goers, almost every single review of the first Czech production dealt with the text itself. In its various reviews, *Dancing at Lughnasa* was often compared to Chekhov's *Three Sisters*.⁷ In telling a story about the unfulfilled

¹ Eva Šormová, ed. *Encyklopedie divadelních souborů* (Praha:Divadelní Ústav, 2000) 111-118.

² All Czech productions of *Dancing at Lughnasa* used Ota Ornest's translation.

³ All translations of Czech articles, reviews and interviews are mine unless indicated otherwise.

⁴ Richard Erml, "Kde se v nás vzala ta finta na přežívání?" *Host.divadlo.cz*, 5 September 2000. <<http://host.divadlo.cz/noviny/archiv/cislo14/rozhovor.html>> 2 April 2013.

⁵ Jitka Sloupová, "Tanec v Čechách," *Svět a Divadlo*, 4.5 (1993) 115.

⁶ Radka Prchalová, "Tanec kolem Tance," *Večerník Praha* 16 March 1993.

lives of five aging sisters living in rural Ireland, it must have struck a note with the Czech audience of *Three Sisters*, a play well-known and often staged in the Czech context. According to critic Radka Prchalová, the whole text is aptly depicted by Michael's concluding monologue: The text is more redolent of emotion than of action, and the atmosphere is more important than the story itself.⁸ “The author lets the audience be carried away by the music, dancing and words and gradually, incidentally in fact, he allows the theme and the meaning of the play to reveal themselves.”⁹ Other reviewers presume that the audience will like the play because of its humorous subtext, its realism and also because it feels like an ordinary story from everyday life. According to Prchalová, some of the questions the text brings about, such as the necessity of going back to one's own roots to restore, or at least recall, the vitality of one's family and at the same time to have the ability to look benignly at the past, no matter how hard it was, are topical regardless of the time or geographical latitude.¹⁰

The director of the Czech premiere of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Jan Burian, worked at Divadlo na Vinohradech from 1991-1995. Nowadays, he is associated mainly with Divadlo J.K.Tyla v Plzni (The J.K. Tyl Theatre in Pilsen), where he has been the managing director since 1995. In August 2013 Burian will assume the office of the managing director of the National Theatre in Prague.¹¹ Burian has taught at the Department of Dramatic Theatre at DAMU (The Academy of Performing Arts in Prague) since 1990, where he has been the department head since 2001, and is also the chairman of the Association of Professional Theatres in the Czech Republic and the director of the International Festival Theatre, Plzeň.

Burian explained his motivation for staging *Dancing at Lughnasa* in an interview which he gave before the premiere. One of the reasons for staging this play was its previous success in Dublin, London and New York. Moreover, thanks to the cooperation between Divadlo na Vinohradech and various translators, the directors had the opportunity to watch contemporary dramatic production. This time the translator Ota Ornest supplied the impulse and impetus by offering his translation of

⁷ Zdeněk A. Tichý, “Pět sester a jedna dáma,” *Mladá fronta dnes*, Vol. 4, No. 67, 22 March 1993.

⁸ Radka Prchalová, “Laskavý pohled do minulosti,” *Večerník Praha*, 22 March 1993.

⁹ Prchalová, “Laskavý pohled do minulosti”.

¹⁰ Prchalová, “Laskavý pohled do minulosti”.

¹¹ *Národní Divadlo.cz*. <[http://www.narodni-divadlo.cz/cs/aktuality/narodni-divadlo-bude-ridit-jan-](http://www.narodni-divadlo.cz/cs/aktuality/narodni-divadlo-bude-ridit-jan)

Dancing at Lughnasa. However, Burian did not choose this play only because of its previous popularity and Ornest's successful translation, but also because it includes five prominent female roles for the actresses from Vinohrady's ensemble.¹²

Even though *Dancing at Lughnasa* is a very complex, multi-layered text, Burian's direction seems to have focused mainly on the general level of human relationships and the importance of family. The simplification of Friel's text in Burian's direction was the most common drawback mentioned in reviews. Those critics in particular who had the opportunity to see *Dancing at Lughnasa* in London, and therefore could compare it with the famous Mason's production, were disappointed. Marie Procházková, for instance, thinks that Mason concentrated on presenting Friel's vision of the world to the audience in the possibly most comprehensible manner. Thanks to the beautiful poetic language, so typical of Friel, he could show the audience ordinary reality from a different perspective. Mason's main aim was to create an atmosphere, and to enable the audience to understand it and feel it. He mediated an ordinary story of an ordinary family, where commonplace events become the basis for a tragedy which takes place beyond the story and beyond the stage.¹³ According to her, Burian uses the bare minimum of what was offered to him by the author and the great translation¹⁴ as he focused mainly on the telling of the story.¹⁵ He chose “the Chekhovian”¹⁶ of Friel, and ignored “the Irish”¹⁷. Moreover, Burian did not develop some of the basic motives and themes within the play, especially Friel's reflection of the mingling of paganism and Christianity within the characters and his reflection of the values of faith. Procházková states:

Friel constantly reminds the audience that not only beyond but also within the Irish Catholic kitchen of the Mundy sisters there is the world of pagan rituals. This idea is even multiplied by the character of Father Jack – the missionary priest [...], who was sent back home from the mission not only because he fell ill, but above all because he assimilated with the native inhabitants and he began accepting local customs and the pagan faith.¹⁸

Apparently, one of the most important themes was not communicated to the

burian-cs> 25 March 2013.

¹² [Miz] “Herečkám pod stromček,” *Večerník Praha* 25 Novemner 1992.

¹³ Marie Procházková, “Irské „sestry” v Čechách,” *Divadelní noviny* 2. 10 (11 May 1993) 4.

¹⁴ The success of some aspects of Ornest's translation is arguable and will be discussed in the last chapter of this thesis.

¹⁵ Procházková 4.

¹⁶ Procházková 4.

¹⁷ Procházková 4.

¹⁸ Procházková 4.

Czech audience at the premiere of *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Unfortunately, the premiere was not an exception, but almost all the subsequent productions also had a similar problem. Instead of developing this theme, Burian focuses on the fates of the sisters and their mutual relationships, on the accurate portrayal of the characters, and on the atmosphere of the situations. Even though his motivation for such a method, as theatre critic Jana Paterová suggests, could be justified by the fact that for the prevailing atheist Czech audience, the theme would not be so interesting and understandable, its omission destroys the original text. Paterová explains: “Friel's play loses its distinctiveness and what is left is just a banal story of Chekhovian atmosphere. The latent tragic dimension of the play, which finally grows into a real tragedy, is absent.”¹⁹

The theme of the conflict between Christianity and Paganism is mostly communicated by the character of Father Jack, however, in the “traditional family story”²⁰, which the Czech audience actually sees on stage; Father Jack is (at least in Paterová's view) an “interesting, but also redundant curiosity.”²¹ Jitka Sloupová, who also saw Mason's production in London, regrets that Burian did not attempt to make his production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* as authentic as was the case of the Abbey production. She tries to find the reason for this in the financial or technical aspects, or in the fear that the action on stage would become alienated from the audience.²²

Not all reviews were critical just of the flaws in Burian's direction. Paterová and Nechutová, for instance, thought that the text itself is problematic because of its static narrative passages.²³ According to Paterová, another problem is the shallowness of the characters.²⁴ It could be argued, however, that in Friel's text, the characters could seem shallow perhaps during the first reading, but in fact they are quite complex. The characters may also have been flattened by the overall simplification of the play. Paterová believes that the biggest challenge for the theatre practitioners who stage this play is to attempt to create the illusion of “normal” life on the stage confronted with the dream, in which Burian succeeded.²⁵ According to

¹⁹ Jana Paterová, “Vinohrady-Reflexe průměrnosti,” *Svět a Divadlo* 4. 5 (1993) 111.

²⁰ Paterová, “Vinohrady-Reflexe průměrnosti,” 111.

²¹ Paterová, “Vinohrady-Reflexe průměrnosti,” 111.

²² Sloupová 115.

²³ Jana Paterová, “Tanec na konci léta,” *PRO* 29 April – 5 May 1993.

²⁴ Paterová, “Tanec na konci léta”.

²⁵ Paterová, “Tanec na konci léta”.

her, the strongest elements of the production include the impressive dance of the women in Act One, and the idyllic love scene between Gerry and Chris.²⁶ Despite those powerful scenes, Paterová reproaches Burian's production for creating the impression of a TV series, where “everything is superrealistic, but also slightly unreal.”²⁷ Nechutová also believes that the actors have insufficient space to create their characters.²⁸ She states that

The production of Friel's play, which was supposed to be a reminder of the value of human cohesion, just slowly unfolds individual moments of action, and rather static sequence of memories does not let the director's intention have full impression.²⁹

The famous dance scene from Act One, which was one of the highlights of Patrick Mason's production, was also commented on in the majority of Czech reviews. Some critics also considered the Vinohrady's version of the sisters' dance as one of the most powerful moments of the show, however those who had the opportunity to see Mason's production, were not so fond of the Vinohrady's creation of this scene. Procházková, for instance, writes: “In London's production the dance was like an explosion, explosion of frustrated women, who were getting rid of their anxieties, the anxieties for the wasted and unfulfilled lives and anxieties of existence.”³⁰ After such a strong experience, she describes the same scene from the production at Vinohrady disappointingly as some kind of “capering”³¹ which was moreover out of rhythm.³² Another problem concerning the dance scene is the choice of music. It is very important, that even though the sisters often dance to dance music of the thirties, the music which plays at the most significant scene is a well-known piece of traditional Irish music, “The Mason's Apron”. However, in the production at Vinohrady this music was substituted by swing music.³³ By doing this, Burian definitively shifted the meaning of Friel's text, who describes in detail which music must be played. The Irish vivid, rhythmical, catchy and powerful music is missing which could not but have adversely affected the powerful atmosphere. Nevertheless, despite the inaccurate choice of music, Sloupová believes that the dance scene

²⁶ Paterová, “Tanec na konci léta”.

²⁷ Paterová, “Tanec na konci léta”.

²⁸ Renata Nechutová, “Pohledy do minulosti,” *Lidové noviny* 31 March 1993.

²⁹ Nechutová.

³⁰ Procházková 4.

³¹ Procházková 4.

³² Procházková 4.

³³ Sloupová 116.

belongs to the highlights of Burian's production.³⁴ According to Sloupová, this is not only to the choreographer Pavel Šmok's credit, but the actors were also brilliant in this scene. Sloupová commends the enthusiasm of the actors, who succeeded in grasping individual modes of expression and spontaneity in dance.³⁵

The critics' opinions of actors' performances vary widely. While some critics claim that the success of the whole production is based on excellent acting, others consider the acting to be in some cases too ordinary and uninventive. Most critics praise especially the actresses playing the five Mundy sisters. The biggest surprise of this production seems to be Kateřina Brožová, playing the part of Rose.³⁶ Brožová, who graduated from DAMU (The Department of Dramatic Theatre at The Academy of Performing Arts in Prague) two years prior to the production, seemed to have been predetermined for roles of beautiful and superficial girls. In the role of Rose, however, she had the opportunity to prove that she is capable of playing a completely different part.³⁷ Nechutová describes her acting enthusiastically: “Brožová in the role of mentally disabled Rose is graceful and impetuously simple-minded, frank and vulnerable in her love at the same time. She looks graceful even in her stylised clumsiness during the dancing.”³⁸ The performance of Marta Vančurová, in the role of Kate, is also mentioned in many reviews. Nechutová, for instance, writes that in Vančurová's interpretation, Kate is not just a moralising and guarding sister, but that she “humanises her role and also enriches it by touching Chekhovian nostalgia.”³⁹ Paterová also appreciates the attempt of Marta Vančurová to break through from fixed television cliché, even though she admits that “the result is a presentation of a professional skill rather than unrepeatable human individuality created by the actress.”⁴⁰ However, Paterová, who saw Mason's production in London, also regrets that Vančurová's fragile Kate cannot be compared with Kate from the London production, who created the impression of an “Irish Dona Bernarda.”⁴¹ From the male part of the ensemble, Svatopluk Skopal in the role of Gerry and Radoslav Brzobohatý, who played Father Jack were worth mentioning in particular. According

³⁴ Sloupová 117.

³⁵ Sloupová 117.

³⁶ Paterová, “Vinohrady-Reflexe průměrnosti,” 111.

³⁷ Prchalová 5.

³⁸ Nechutová.

³⁹ Nechutová.

⁴⁰ Paterová, “Vinohrady-Reflexe průměrnosti,” 112.

to Nechutová, “Skopal endowed Gerry with personal charm, dancing skills, but above all inner unease and daydreaming.”⁴² Radoslav Brzobohatý, already at that time an acclaimed actor, surprised some critics in this role, by which he convinced them of the possibilities of his further acting development. He gradually attracted the audience especially because of the depth of his experience.⁴³ Apart from these four actors' performances, not much can be stated about the overall acting on the basis of the majority of reviews, as some of the statements did not reveal much about the actual performances. Unfortunately, such vague evaluation is not exceptional, especially in reviews from Czech newspapers.

One of the most successful elements of Burian's production was, according to the critics, the stage design created by Karel Glogr. Glogr, a long-term colleague of Burian, is also a permanent stage designer with Divadlo na Vinohradech and a professor at the Department of Stage Design at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. Glogr cooperates with the majority of Czech theatres and has also worked in other European theatres. He was nominated for prestigious Alfred Radok's Prize in 1995.⁴⁴ Even though when compared to the highly-acclaimed design of Joe Vanek for the original production, Glogr's design probably does not reach its values, it was mostly praised by the critics for some of its original ideas which helped to create the required atmosphere. Sloupová once again compares Glogr's set design with Vanek's: “Instead of a “real” wheat field, as in the sensation of the Dublin production, we see a tumbledown stone fence [...] and on the blue horizon a big outline of a roof of the house with a high chimney.”⁴⁵ According to her, the house, which was just one of the features of Vanek's powerful stage design, is promoted in the Czech production to “the most powerful visual symbol of the story.”⁴⁶ Glogr's most successful innovation, however was a special device that helped creating the dreamlike atmosphere: “The return of memories is evoked by a dreamlike translucent green curtain, behind which the contours of the house and old kitchen, where Michael's images liven up, are

⁴¹ Paterová, “Vinohrady-Reflexe průměrnosti,” 111-112.

⁴² Nechutová.

⁴³ Radka Tesárková, “Zápas o lidskou existenci. Pět sester z Vinohrad,” *SD* 21 May 1993.

⁴⁴ *Damu.cz*. <<http://www.damu.cz/katedry-a-kabinety/katedra-scenografie/pedagogove/mga.doc.-karel-glogr>> 20 March 2013.

⁴⁵ Sloupová 115.

⁴⁶ Sloupová 115.

hidden.”⁴⁷ During Michael's introductory monologue, all the other characters who are motionless in a tableau, are separated from Michael by this gauze curtain, which defocuses a memory thirty or more years old.⁴⁸ Lighting also plays a very important role. Prchalová notes that whether it evokes a warm afternoon in summer, or a blood-red sunset, the light is always soft and benign.⁴⁹ The reviewer Zdeňek A. Tichý compares Glogr's set design to the famous production of *Our Uppish and Defiant Fellows*, directed by Miroslav Macháček. According to Tesárková, both Glogr's simple stage design and Dana Hávová's “dusty greige costumes”⁵⁰ contribute to the success of the production.⁵¹ Sloupová, who compares the costumes to those of the original production, is of a different opinion. According to her, Czech costumes including dresses with frills from the thirties in brick shade and either wellington boots or low shoes with falling socks do not give the same impression as the washed out poor dress, headscarfs and clodhoppers from the Abbey production.⁵²

Despite all the flaws of Burian's production, the first Czech production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* could be considered a success. Apart from sufficient positive reaction from the critics, the fact that *Dancing at Lughnasa* was staged three more times the same or following year supports this assumption. Tesárková concludes her review in the following words:

Burian succeeded in bringing on stage a full-blooded, compact production with balanced actors' performances and well evoked atmosphere about the existence of struggling life...a production which belongs to the highlights of this year's theatre season.⁵³

Paterová, in attempting to sum up the opinions of other reviewers, states that this production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* was enthusiastically acclaimed by the majority of critics and also obtained high ratings in critical charts. However, there were also a few dissenting voices. The reproaches rarely concerned the text of the play itself, but focused on the direction, the actors' performances and the deprived specificity of Friel's text in Burian's direction.⁵⁴ The critics usually emphasized that

⁴⁷ Nechutová.

⁴⁸ Nechutová.

⁴⁹ Prchalová 5.

⁵⁰ Tesárková.

⁵¹ Tesárková.

⁵² Paterová, “Vinohrady-Reflexe průměrnosti”.

⁵³ Tesárková.

⁵⁴ Paterová, “Vinohrady-Reflexe průměrnosti” 112.

Dancing at Lughnasa is “the drama of Irish sisters as well as Irish soul.”⁵⁵ In Friel’s text there are unique human fates in unique religious and social contexts; however Burian thoroughly builds the psychological-realistic image of a well-known everyday reality.⁵⁶ Sloupová, who has overall been rather critical in her analysis, concludes in more amiable tone: “In spite of all the mentioned reservations, Vinohrady's production belongs to the best performances of the past Prague season, mostly because the distinctive change for the better in the style of acting of the ensemble.”⁵⁷

In conclusion it could be stated that even though Burian's production may not have become as great a theatrical experience as was the case of the world premiere of *Dancing at Lughnasa* at the Abbey Theatre, it was a success nonetheless, and in particular some aspects of the production, such as the actor's performances and Glogr's set design, were themselves critically acclaimed.

5.2 Státní divadlo Ostrava, Divadlo Antonína Dvořáka, 1993

The second Czech production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* was staged at Národní divadlo moravskoslezské (National Moravian-Silesian Theatre), at Divadlo Antonína Dvořáka (Antonín Dvořák Theatre), then called Státní divadlo Ostrava (the State Theatre Ostrava), seven months after the Czech premiere. This production was chosen to open the new season and premiered on 30th October 1993. The premiere was awaited with tension, as it was not only a production of a new drama, but also the artistic team consisted of young theatre practitioners from Slovakia – guests to Státní divadlo Ostrava. The director Peter Gábor, at that time only thirty years old, has worked alongside many Slovakian, Moravian and Czech theatres and has directed more than sixty productions. Since 1993 he has cooperated with the National Moravian-Silesian Theatre. He received The Award of Czech Theatre for Direction⁵⁸ in 2002 for his productions of Goethe's *Faust I* and *II*, which he directed for the Moravské divadlo Olomouc (Moravian Theatre in Olomouc). He also has experience

⁵⁵ Paterová, “Vinohrady-Reflexe průměrnosti,” 112.

⁵⁶ Paterová, “Vinohrady-Reflexe průměrnosti,” 112.

⁵⁷ Sloupová 115 – 118.

⁵⁸ *ČeskéDivadlo.cz* <<http://www.ceskedivadlo.cz/ceny-ceskeho-divadla/ceny-ceskeho-divadla-2001-%E2%80%93>> 20 March 2013.

working at Théâtre Molière in Paris. His direction of *The Comedy of Errors*, which he directed for the Summer Shakespeare Festival in 2008, was an extraordinary success.⁵⁹

Gábor's production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* was mostly praised in the reviews. However, it must be noted that because Czech theatre criticism is rather focused on and in Prague, regional productions do not usually receive much attention, which was also the case for Gábor's production. Whereas about ten reviews were published in newspapers, and at least three more reviews in specialist theatre magazines about the Czech premiere at Vinohrady, only four reviews altogether were written about this production. In these reviews, Gábor was praised mainly for having succeeded in creating the right atmosphere and for his sensitive leadership of the actors.⁶⁰ Theatre critic Jiří Štefanides claims that the artistic team discovered their own theme in Friel's text. According to him, it was the first time since the Velvet Revolution that he witnessed something more than just good acting on the stage of this theatre.⁶¹ It is apparent, however, that as well as Burian, Gábor also simplified Friel's text. The titles of some articles about this production reflect such simplification. For instance, a short article entitled 'A play in which women will find themselves starts with the following words: "A play about women and for women will be staged at Divadlo Antonína Dvořáka."⁶² This is certainly not what Friel intended when he dedicated the play to his aunts. Interpreting *Dancing at Lughnasa* as a play about women and for women oversimplifies this complex text. The female characters and their position within the play are undoubtedly crucial to the play. This does not mean, however, that *Dancing at Lughnasa* can only be interpreted as a play for women. In an interview given by one of the actresses before the premiere, the radical simplification of the text is confirmed: "Despite their hard lives, those women are able to enjoy the little pleasures of every day. They can live with their dreams and desires and take life as they find it. [...] I believe that in this lyrical comedy, women will find themselves."⁶³ Such interpretation explicitly highlights the awareness of

⁵⁹ *Národní divadlo moravskoslezské.cz* <<http://www.ndm.cz/cz/osoba/663-Gabor-peter.html>> 20 March 2013.

⁶⁰ Jiřina Veselá, "Tanec na začátku sezóny," *Lidové noviny* 3 November 1993.

⁶¹ Jiří Štefanides, "Svátek Lughnasy v moravské Ostravě," *Divadelní noviny* 2. 21 (14 December 1993) 4.

⁶² [GL] "Hra, ve které ženy najdou samy sebe," *Svoboda* 24 September 1993.

⁶³ "Hra, ve které ženy najdou samy sebe".

merely one layer of the text. Moreover, the genre lyrical comedy suggests that the director may have focused far too much on the comical aspects of the play. *Dancing at Lughnasa* does not lack humour, however the overall tone is tragic and it could be argued that calling it a comedy is a misunderstanding. According to critic Jiřina Veselá, Gábor succeeded in creating the atmosphere of memory without using cheap alienation.⁶⁴ Veselá claims that “Gábor esteems memory as a value through which we search our identity.”⁶⁵ Moreover, the choreography of Libuře Králová completes the impressionistic gesture of the director. Together they use not only spontaneous expression, but also very precise stylisation.⁶⁶ The famous dance scene is once again considered to be one of the highlights of the performance, and in fact in this production there was one more dance added at the end of the performance.⁶⁷

Not much space is devoted to the description of the set design in reviews, the only relevant note is that made by Štefanides who states that dramatic tension is created by the contrast between the cramped house and the outside world. The elements of non-illusory stylisation of the *mis en scene* and set design contribute to the fresh impression of the production.⁶⁸

In terms of acting, Alena Sasínová-Polarczyk and Veronika Forejtová seem to have gained the most critical attention. Sasínová-Polarczyk, who is used to playing the roles of lively and independent women was well-casted in the role of Maggie. Štefanides notices the effective contrast that Sasínová-Polarczyk and Veronika Forejtová (Kate), whose portrayal of Kate makes the house of the Mundy sisters resemble of the house of Bernarda Alba, create.⁶⁹ According to Veselá, Forejtova's Kate is the most dominant of the sisters. Her Kate is strong and tough woman, capable of making any sacrifice to maintain the safety and security of the family. Oscillating between the reserved teacher and the affectionate and understanding woman, Kate thus becomes a multi-layered, full-blooded female.⁷⁰ Another extraordinary performance is presented by the young actress Pavlına Kafková. Veselá describes her performance as follows:

⁶⁴ Veselá.

⁶⁵ Veselá.

⁶⁶ Veselá.

⁶⁷ Veselá.

⁶⁸ Štefanides 4.

⁶⁹ Štefanides 4.

Kafková gave her character not just her gracefulness, but mainly the childlike artlessness and the total belief in the good in the world. The young actress plays with an enormous inner enthusiasm and with accurate managing of technical artistic expressions such as stammering.⁷¹

Veselá claims that the male characters are not so successful and mentions only Milan Šulc, who gains the audience's attention mostly because of his realistic and detailed portrayal of Father Jack. It is apparent, however, that almost all the space is given to the female characters in this production. The conclusion of Veselá's review affirms this: "None of the heroines resign despite other strokes of fate. Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* therefore becomes the celebration of womanhood."⁷²

The second Czech production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* was accepted positively by the critics. Even though it may seem that it was perhaps more successful than the Czech premiere, this cannot be stated, simply because many more reviews were written about the premiere. However, conclusions could be drawn from the review by the acclaimed critic and university professor Jiří Štefanides, who praises the production for three reasons. Firstly, he is satisfied because of the successful co-operation of three generations of actors. Secondly, because the actresses have revived the tradition of vivid and cultivated acting. Thirdly, he is contented with the successful guest appearance of the young theatre generation from Slovakia. In conclusion, Štefanides expresses his hopes that this production could be the first step towards the overcoming the theatrical and audience's crisis, which Divadlo Antonína Dvořáka has faced.⁷³

5.3 Divadlo J.K.Tyla v Plzni, 1994

The popularity of *Dancing at Lughnasa* among Czech audiences is evidenced by the fact that the production in Divadlo J.K.Tyla v Plzni (the J.K. Tyl Theatre in Pilsen) was the third staging of the play within a year. Similarly to Patrick Mason in the second production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* in the Abbey Theatre, Jan Burian, who directed Czech premiere, staged it for the second time with the same artistic team, but a completely different cast. Possibly, as in the case of the Czech premiere,

⁷⁰ Veselá.

⁷¹ Veselá.

⁷² Veselá.

the main motivation for Burian's decision to direct the play once more in Plzeň was the opportunity of the five prominent female roles the play offers to actresses. Of course, the worldwide success of *Dancing at Lughnasa* also played an important role. Upon his return to the Divadlo J.K.Tyla v Plzni as a guest director, he became the managing director within two years, and retained this position until today.⁷⁴

In his review, referring to Chekhov's *Three Sisters* entitled 'Five sisters for the third time', theatre critic Vladimír Mikulka accepts the fact that Friel created five important female roles, but also emphasizes that this is not the only reason for the play's popularity. In his opinion, the quality of the text itself plays an important role.⁷⁵ Even though at first glance the play may appear to be an ineffective and undramatic story of five sisters, it includes subtle humour and a certain dose of tension. Mikulka is one of the few critics, who realize that there is a conflict between Christianity and paganism in the character of Father Jack, in the Celtic cult of Lugh, and also an erotic tension under the calm surface.⁷⁶ He claims that dance includes both of the main dramatic agents of the play; unrestrained paganism and repressed eroticism. Dancing is also the most common theme of conversation and memories.⁷⁷ Contrary to Mikulka, Jana Machalická asserts that the play lacks dramatic conflict, which is substituted by small episodes consisting of poetic images of past actions.⁷⁸ As it is obvious that Mikulka has a thorough knowledge of the text, it may be supposed that once again, the director did not manage to transfer the play's inherent dramatic tension into his production. Machalická speculates that the main theme of the play may not be the ordinary concerns of the unmarried women and the gradual disintegration of this unusual family, but the peculiar mysticism and reminiscence of the pagan rituals and mysterious customs of the ancient Celts, which are present in their microcosm.⁷⁹ Apparently, Burian's production in Plzeň attempted to focus more on the aspects of paganism, than his first production; however, it is not clear whether this was because he aimed to emphasize the crucial theme, or whether it was used to make the production more attractive and interesting, due to its mysteriousness.

⁷³ Štefanides 4.

⁷⁴ *Damu.cz*. <<https://www.damu.cz/katedry-a-kabinety/katedra-cinoherniho-divadla/pedagogove/jan-burian-mga-doc>> 20 March 2013.

⁷⁵ Vladimír Mikulka, "Pět sester potřetí," *Divadelní noviny* 3.7 (5 April 1994) 5.

⁷⁶ Mikulka 5.

⁷⁷ Mikulka 5.

⁷⁸ Jana Machalická, "Tanec na konci léta potřetí," *Lidové Noviny* 7 March 1994.

Another (anonymous) reviewer did not even mention such themes; according to him, the main concern of the play was the re-discovering of the elemental human feelings and relationships, and the importance of memory.⁸⁰ In an interview with Marie Caltová, Burian confirmed that for him, the theme of memory is the most important and current, because “Whenever people forget their history, both, personal and social, they inevitably lose the criteria of values. A man lives thanks to his ancestors and their world experience is rooted in him.”⁸¹ The theme of memory might have been so important in the Czech context owing to recent history. *Dancing at Lughnasa* was first brought to Czech stage only four years after the Velvet Revolution. Those, whose conscience was not clear and whose reputation was tainted, because of their actions during the preceding bleak period of the communist era, wanted themselves and the public to forget, and often misinterpreted the existing memories.

The biggest problem associated with this production was once again the interpretation of the conflict between Catholicism and paganism. Machalická claims that even though the sisters are orthodox Catholics, something of their ancient savagery forces itself to the surface, and their brother loves to reminisce about ritual sacrifice to pagan gods.⁸² According to her, Burian did not succeed even for the second time in getting to the heart of the matter of Friel's play. Instead, Burian simplified the whole story, deliberately directing the actors into understated performances and the whole production into the style of a conversation play. Machalická concludes that Burian never “exceeds the limits of his own neat and elegant convention, even though he could have depended on Karel Glogr's impressive and imaginative set design.”⁸³ Mikulka also agrees that Burian's staging of *Dancing at Lughnasa* gives the impression of “an overly neat and academic production.”⁸⁴ In his opinion, “compared to Friel's text, the production misses the inner tension, which is hard to define, but omnipresent. Such loss is only partly balanced by the intensification of comical moments.”⁸⁵

⁷⁹ Machalická.

⁸⁰ Anonymous, “Pět žen na konci léta. Premiéra hry Briana Friela v Komorním divadle v Plzni,” *Plzeňský deník* 28 February 1994.

⁸¹ Marie Caltová, “Návrat k základním hodnotám,” *Plzeňský deník* 24 February 1994.

⁸² Machalická.

⁸³ Machalická.

⁸⁴ Mikulka 5.

⁸⁵ Mikulka 5.

The critics in the main agreed on the high quality of performances in this production. Machalická claims that once again, the fact that the director worked with mature actors meant that the production was comprehensible on the general level of the play, despite many problems with the portrayal of an Irish context and consequent flattening of the theme. Machalická commends Monika Šváblová (Kate), Ilona Vaňková (Maggie), Kateřina Hrachovcová (Rose), a debutant in Plzeň, Pavel Pavlovský (Father Jack) and Pavel Kikinčuk (Gerry).⁸⁶ Mikulka also praises the professionalism of the whole cast, with the only exception being Josef Nechutný in the role of Michael. However, he claims that the overall production leaves the impression of a “well-done craft”⁸⁷, but, unfortunately, nothing more.⁸⁸ According to Mikulka, the production is flawless, but does not ultimately exceed a good average in quality.⁸⁹

5.4 Slezské Divadlo Opava, 2004

Between the years 1994, when *Dancing at Lughnasa* was staged in Plzeň and 2004, the year it opened in Slezské Divadlo Opava, three other productions of this play were staged. These include productions at Východočeské divadlo Pardubice, directed by Jana Kališová and premiering 9th April 1994, and two productions at Vyšší odborná škola herecká (The College of Acting) – in 1999, directed by Slávka Hozová and in 2002, directed by Ondřej Zajíc. Even though these productions will not be discussed in this thesis, they are worth mentioning, as they provide evidence of the popularity of *Dancing at Lughnasa* in regional and students' theatres.

In terms of the production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* in Opava, the previous claim about the lack of interest of critics in regional theatres was confirmed. According to the database of the Arts and Theatre Institute in Prague, only one brief review was published in regional newspapers, which was impossible to obtain in Prague libraries. Thus, almost nothing can be written about it in terms of critical acclaim. However, the director Jaroslava Šiktancová was willing to provide an

⁸⁶ Machalická 6.

⁸⁷ Mikulka 5.

⁸⁸ Mikulka 5.

interview about her production and her input is the basis for this subchapter.⁹⁰

Jaroslava Šiktancová has taught at DAMU (The Department of Dramatic Theatre at The Academy of Performing Arts in Prague) since 1993. She started her studies at the same school in 1974, but was expelled two years later due to being a signatory of Charter 77, eventually gaining her diploma in 1990. In the meantime, she worked in miscellaneous careers, all the while cooperating with various theatres. She has directed many productions in regional theatres throughout the Czech Republic including Cheb, Liberec, Kladno, Opava, Olomouc and also in theatres in Prague.⁹¹

Jaroslava Šiktancová, who enjoys Irish drama in general, claims that compared to other Irish dramatists, Friel seems to be more benign and gentle in the way he draws his characters and their conflicts. Even though she had no direct experience in staging a play by Friel before her production of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, she observed closely her colleague Jakub Špalek's productions of Friel's *Translations* (*Proměny*) at Divadelní spolek Kašpar, where she was a director. In fact, Šiktancová discovered Friel thanks to this production. Unlike some other directors, Šiktancová does not see *Dancing at Lughnasa* merely as a great opportunity for actresses. She admits that this is one reason for staging the play, but claims that presuming it is the only one would be too banal. For Šiktancová, the motivation for choosing *Dancing at Lughnasa* was connected with her personal experience; many of the themes resembled her own life. She admits that having a strong real-life model of the play in her own family contributed to her falling in love with this play and also influenced (although unintentionally at that time) her choice to direct the play in Opava, where she was invited by Václav Klemens. According to her, *Dancing at Lughnasa* is so popular among the Czech audience because there are certain similarities between Ireland and the Czech Republic. She sees this similarity in the image of a poor rural area and connects this image with the tradition of rural drama, which has always been very popular in the Czech Republic. Šiktancová suggests that *Dancing at Lughnasa* fits into this tradition, and in certain aspects could resemble *Maryša* or *Její Pastorkyňa*. Another reason could be the Czech audience's familiarity with plays by

⁸⁹ Mikulka 5.

⁹⁰ The whole subchapter is based on the interview with Jaroslava Šiktancová from 25 March 2013.

⁹¹ *Damu.cz*. <<http://www.damu.cz/katedry-a-kabinety/katedra-cinoherniho-divadla/pedagogove/jaroslava-Šiktancová-mga>>20 March 2013.

Chekhov, by whom Friel is influenced a great deal. The quality of Friel's texts has yet another strength – in his plays there appears a kind of comprehensible theatre speech, less literal than poetic. His characters are capable of self-reflection, they talk about the things they have lost and gained. *Dancing at Lughnasa* is also interesting, because it is at once realistic and unreal.

On the other hand, the greatest drawback of the text is, according to Šiktancová, the presence of long narrative monologues. She remembers having shortened these narrative passages, with the result that Michael became slightly defocused. At some points, Michael began to speak and then entered the space where his aunts and the rest of the monologue were implanted into the action. Šiktancová considers the monologues a bit dangerous and disadvantageous, as there is a clue how to interpret them. However, this also gives the director a free hand to change slightly Michael's point of view. In her production, for example, she added the motive of suitcases. Agnes and Rose were packing their suitcases throughout the play, so it was apparent that they were planning their escape a long time ahead.

Apart from dealing with the lengthy narrative passages, another problematic aspect of the production was the interpretation of the character of Father Jack. According to Šiktancová, this is the most complicated but interesting and multi-layered character because of the theme of faith he bears. She admits that in her production she did not find the right solution of how to interpret Father Jack. She focused on his peculiarities and he was thus interpreted as a comical role, whereas the Lughnasa Festival and the background of Catholic prudery versus pagan wildness remained just that, as background.

Šiktancová spoke especially enthusiastically about working with the female members of the cast. Ivana Petrželová, who played Kate, was at first very reluctant to play this role. Apparently, it was her first role after her maternity leave. Previously, she was accustomed to playing completely different types of roles – of young, sensuous characters. Suddenly, she was expected to deal with the portrayal of a prim and proper Kate. After the first reading, she was not at all satisfied, but her professionalism came to the fore and she grew into the role, leading to a very accurate portrayal. Šiktancová particularly praised Sabina Figarová (Rose) and Hana Vaňková (Agnes) who managed to capture perfectly the close and beautiful relationship of these two sisters.

The set design created by Libuše Josefy, also a guest to Opava, was relatively raw and functioned sometimes on the symbolic level. Šiktancová described the function of a ramp, which enabled the actors to leave the house and suddenly appear on the roof. The dance scenes between Gerry and Chris took place on the roof, which shifted the meaning of the scene and their relationship. Their intimate moments were enacted on the roof, beyond the cramped kitchen, beyond the everyday life. Radůza, nowadays a popular songwriter, composed music, inspired by traditional Irish music for this production. It was not their first cooperation, as Šiktancová had cast her in two of her productions at Kašpar, at the very beginning of Radůza's career.⁹²

As has been already stated, due to the absence of reviews of this production, not much can be written about its critical acclaim. However, Šiktancová, who claims to be very critical of her own work, described her immense satisfaction at being involved in the production during Foibos Festival at Švandovo divadlo na Smíchově. She was pleased because the actors did not allow the atmosphere to influence their acting – they did not try to act better than usual, but were very natural in their performance and there was harmony in the ensemble acting. Šiktancová claimed that she could be very proud of them. Moreover, the production fitted well physically into the theatre space of Švandovo divadlo. Šiktancová stated that people who do not usually praise her work acclaimed this production, and that the audience was also satisfied. The production touched the audiences' hearts, but without turning the performance into emotional blackmail.

5.5 Městské divadlo Zlín, 2004

The final production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* that this thesis focuses on premiered in Městské divadlo Zlín on 14th February 2004 and was staged by Slovak director Ivan Balad'a. By this time, the play had achieved critical and audience acclaim not only in Ireland, England and the United States, but worldwide, including the Czech Republic. Alongside this, the popularity of Irish plays in general gradually

⁹² These were productions of *Lišák* - Roman Císař's adaptation of D.H.Lawrence's *The Fox* (premiere 17th October 1999 at Divadelní spolek Kašpar), for which Radůza composed the music and Clemens Brentano's *O Baronovi z Hopsapichu* (*Das Märchen vom Baron von Hüpfentich* - premiere 16th September 2001 at Divadelní spolek Kašpar), where Radůza played the role of Paní Týden and also composed the music.

increased.⁹³ A good example of this is the repertoire of Divadelní spolek Kašpar, which includes Brian Friel's *Translations*⁹⁴, its acclaimed production of Martin McDonagh's *The Cripple of Inishmaan*⁹⁵ and the immense success of Martin McDonagh's *The Lonesome West*⁹⁶ at Činoherní klub. *Dancing at Lughnasa*, which was previously staged eight times in professional or students' theatres also contributed to the awareness and popularity of Irish drama. In his review, theatre critic Luboš Mareček highlights the success of Gábor's and Šiktancova's productions.⁹⁷

Ivan Balad'a holds an exceptional position amongst the directors of Czech productions of *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Having been born the same year in which the play is set, Balad'a is the first director of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, belonging to the older generation. Furthermore, Balad'a is not primarily a theatre director. Initially studying design at art school, he later attended FAMU (the Film School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague). Before he began working in theatre, he became famous for directing television series and films, and is one of the filmmakers of "The Golden Sixties", an exceptionally successful period of Czech cinematography. His most successful film is *Archa Bláznů* (Arch of Fools), which he began shooting in 1970, but could not finish until 1990, after the fall of communism. Balad'a has been connected to Městské divadlo Zlín since 1995, and some of his most successful productions there include *Intrigue and Love*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, *Tartuffe*, *The Miser* and *The Government Inspector*. In his productions, his experience with filming and art are apparent, and he is also known for his sensitive work with actors.⁹⁸

Balad'a's productions are known for their mildness and the absence of any directorial "showing off"⁹⁹ and *Dancing at Lughnasa* seems to be no exception. Mareček states that at first, the production was playful and lovable, but later the

⁹³ Ondřej Pílný, "Suitably Relevant": Irish Drama and Theatre in the Czech Republic, 2000-2007". Mária Kurdi., ed. *Literary and Cultural Relations: Ireland, Hungary, and Central and Eastern Europe*. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2009. 68- 71.

⁹⁴ *Proměny*, director Jakub Špalek, Divadelní spolek Kašpar Praha, premiere 5 May 1997.

⁹⁵ *Mrzák Inishmaanský*, director Jakub Špalek, Divadelní spolek Kašpar Praha, premiere 8 November 2002; last performance 7 December 2009.

⁹⁶ *Osiřelý západ*, director Ondřej Sokol, Činoherní klub, premiere 8 March 2002, still on repertoire.

⁹⁷ Luboš Mareček, "I ve Zlíně tančí na konci léta," *Divadelní noviny* 13.7 (30 March 2004) 5.

⁹⁸ Jana Kafková, "Sedmdesátník," *Divadlozin.cz.*, <<http://www.divadlo.zlin.cz/page/68583.iv-an-Balad'a/>>10 April 2013.

⁹⁹ Kafková.

tragic tone began to prevail. The set design, created by Sylva Marková, apparently helps to interpret the story: The actors play on two sprung platforms with realistic furniture in the background. The swaying platforms are unpredictable in their movement; like human fate, it is sometimes difficult to keep balance. At other times, the floating platforms rock with the characters into the rhythm of the dance music of the 1930s.¹⁰⁰ According to Mareček's review, the acting was professional, but probably not as exceptional as in the case of the previously described productions. Zdena Kružíková attempts to evoke Kate's seriousness through the power of personality rather than by loud performance, but it does not work on stage as the personality blurs. Milena Marciliová, in the role of Maggie is crazier, and possibly also more attractive. Her Maggie is an aging woman, who has not forgotten about her desires and is capable of "letting herself go". Mareček also appreciates the performance of Rostislav Marek, who is able to frame the story without infantile grimacing and unnecessary sentiment. Apparently Balad'a did not interpret the character of Father Jack in all his depth. According to Mareček, Dušan Sitek's Father Jack is "a confused, muttering madman, who arouses the other characters' and the audience's sympathy."¹⁰¹

Mareček concludes his review by claiming that "Balad'a's production is symmetrical, but not revolutionary, and is as plain as the people it concerns. It culminates interestingly in its atmosphere and unobtrusive emotionality."¹⁰² According to reviewer Jaroslava Suchmelová, the main success of the production is based on the strength of the actresses of Zlín's ensemble. Suchmelová claims, that thanks to the "powerful atmosphere and honesty of the actors' performances, the stage and auditorium undergo a genuinely mutual experience."¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Mareček 5.

¹⁰¹ Mareček 5.

¹⁰² Mareček 5.

¹⁰³ Jaroslava Suchmelová, "Divadelní sezóna končí," *Divadlozin.cz*. June 2004.
<<http://www.divadlo.zlin.cz/page/68460.divadelni-sezona-konci/>> 20 March 2013.

6. Conclusion: The Comparison of *Dancing at Lughnasa* in Irish and Czech Context

Even though Brian Friel was, at the time of the world premiere of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, already considered one of the greatest contemporary Irish playwrights, he remained unknown to Czech audiences for a further three years. However, from its Czech premiere at Divadlo na Vinohradech in 1990 up until the present day, *Dancing at Lughnasa* has been staged ten times on Czech stages and thus became the most frequently staged play by a contemporary Irish dramatist in the Czech Republic. Even though none of the eleven productions reached the same level of critical acclaim and theatrical awards as those staged in Ireland, *Dancing at Lughnasa* quickly became popular among the Czech audience. Richard Pine tries to explain Friel's popularity abroad:

Friel's work travels more readily than Murphy's, which is resolutely and unremittingly local. What it is that makes plays like *Translations* and even *Faith Healer* universal in their resonance while remaining faithful to microscopic detail is always uncertain. It is Friel's particular magic as a writer and in *Dancing at Lughnasa* he has employed that magic yet again to provide a text which is almost inconceivable yet utterly convincing as a dramatic experience.¹

The most serious issue with the Czech productions was the problem of the cultural translation of Friel's text, which repeatedly resulted in the simplification of a complex play. Some of the significant themes, such as the conflict between Catholicism and paganism, or emigration, were often suppressed, and productions were based on more general themes including the importance of family. Some of the simplification occurred already on the level of the Czech translation of *Dancing at Lughnasa*. As Ondřej Pilný pointed out, the title of the play itself is translated incorrectly.² Whereas the original title includes the name of Lughnasa, one of the main four Celtic festivals, the Czech translation – *Tanec na konci léta* (Dancing at the end of summer) replaces this festival by the general name of a season. More precisely, it shifts the play's setting to the end of summer. Such translation is

¹ Richard Pine, David Grant and Derek West, "Dancing at Lughnasa," *Theatre Ireland* 22 (May 1990) 7.

² Doc. Ondřej Pilný, PhD brought this fact to my attention. The following explanation expresses my interpretation.

inaccurate, by because omitting Lughnasa from the play's title, it loses both its magic and the connotation of the Celtic festival. Moreover, “the end of summer” has undoubtedly other different connotations.

Dancing at Lughnasa is often considered uneventful by the Czech critics and audience, which is a result of misinterpretation of the text. It may seem at first look that no significant dramatic conflict occurs on the obvious level; however, much is happening below the surface, creating dramatic tensions which make *Dancing at Lughnasa* a great play. Regrettably, such tensions are often not present in Czech productions. One source of this tension is created by the many contrasts present in the play. As Rushe puts it, these are

[...] contrasts between the joyous celebration of the harvest god Lugh, and the thin-lipped Christianity of the eldest sister, and between paganism and Christianity, and between the uninhibited polygamous culture of Uganda and the rigid attitudes which bind the metaphoric Ballybeg, and between the religious and the secular, and much else.³

These contrasts are very often omitted in terms of the Czech productions, deteriorating the play's impact. Czech reviews also reflect the simplification of the text. Whereas the Irish reviews employ several modes of interpretation and critical approaches, including feminist and post-colonial reading⁴, interpretations of the text by Czech critics are restricted to the basic level of human relationships. According to them, the most common themes present in *Dancing at Lughnasa* are the importance of family, the nature of memory, womanhood, suppressed sexuality and forms of love. As critic Jitka Sloupová noted, a lot of reviewers described *Dancing at Lughnasa* as “a play about human solidarity”⁵ and about a heroic effort of keeping a family together.⁶ The play is also often compared to Chekhov's *Three sisters* or to Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*.

In terms of motivation, almost all Irish directors of the play had previous experience with staging a Friel text. By the time of the Irish premiere, Friel was a canonical author⁷, and therefore it could be claimed that to stage a play by Friel was

³ Desmond Rushe, “Many-layered sandwich – but it lacks real meat,” *Irish Independent* 25 April 1990.

⁴ Zdeňka Brandejská, “Jako by veškerá řeč kapitulovala před pohybem: Kritické přístupy ke hře Briana Friela *Dancing at Lughnasa/Tanec na konci léta*,” *Theatralia: Sborník prací Filozofické fakulty brněnské univerzity Q 8/2005* (Brno: Masarykova univerzita v Brně, 2005) 26 – 27.

⁵ Jitka Sloupová, “Tanec v Čechách,” *Svět a Divadlo* 4.5 (1993) 116.

⁶ Sloupová 116.

⁷ Pine 7.

an honour and possibly also a guaranteed success. As Robert Welch states, “One script which the Abbey was glad to see was Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* in 1989, marking his return to the Abbey after devoting his playwriting talents and personal energies to the Field Day company since its beginnings in 1980.”⁸ They read *Dancing at Lughnasa* in the context of familiarity with Friel's other successful plays. Welch continues:

Dancing at Lughnasa (24 April 1990), directed by Patrick Mason, translated the tensions arising from past trauma into new and exciting registers of theatrical language. Friel returned to the Abbey with a play that introduced radical new perspectives on how people saw things, and why they did or did not remember the past.⁹

On the other hand, in the Czech context, Friel was unknown and the decision to stage *Dancing at Lughnasa* might have been considered a risk. The most common motivation of Czech directors for staging *Dancing at Lughnasa* was probably the opportunity to give significant roles to an ensemble of actresses. Its reputation as a new and critically-acclaimed play by a successful Irish playwright certainly also contributed. Other reasons for staging *Dancing at Lughnasa* on Czech stages were the quality of the text itself, its resemblance to Chekhov, and the increasing popularity of Irish drama in the Czech Republic. Of course, personal motivation may have been a further reason, as in the case of Jaroslava Šiktancová, who claimed to have fallen in love with the play as it reminded her of her own childhood.

The aforementioned simplification of Friel's text on Czech stages may often have been a method of coping with the lack of awareness of the Irish situation and context in the Czech Republic. Various themes were either suppressed or omitted completely. Theatre critic Vladimír Miklulka remembers that the Czech productions of *Dancing at Lughnasa* were not particularly concerned with “Irishness.”¹⁰ According to him, however, ignorance of the Irish context did not influence the audience's experience. He notes: “Personally, I do not think that ignorance of the Irish context necessarily means a difficulty in understanding the play. It is based on a clear story and conflict, which is comprehensible even outside of Ireland.”¹¹ Šiktancová, is of a different opinion. She claims that by transferring any play into a

⁸ Robert Welch, *The Abbey Theatre 1899 – 1999: form and pressure* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 225.

⁹ Welch 225.

¹⁰ In conversation with the author, 31 March 2013.

¹¹ In conversation with the author, 31 March 2013.

different context, the play naturally suffers, and ignorance of the context significantly changes the production and therefore our perception of the text¹²:

I think that the Czech audience is definitely deprived of something from the original text without knowing the Irish context. The same problem occurs for example in plays by Eugene O'Neill or Tennessee Williams, because when the American context is removed, all that is left are the passions, which is definitively impoverishing the play. Therefore I believe that anytime the context is left out, it is a shame. However, it is inevitable – when staging a foreign play. [As for the Irish context] a Czech audience cannot imagine how much hunger there was, that people were suffering so much hardship, also that it is a coastal country and there is so much of the air and of the green. And it is such a long distance from one cottage to another. [...] So when the context is removed, or ignored, or suppressed, there is a danger that the whole play could lapse into sentimentality.¹³

Czech theatres attempted to compensate the simplification of *Dancing at Lughnasa* and omission of the Irish context by putting information about Ireland into programme brochures. Those were rather extensive, mainly comprising extra information about the Irish context. Czech programme brochures seem to have tried squeezing in as much information about Ireland as possible. In the brochure for the Czech premiere, the literary manager, Václav Königsmark, wrote an article “Pamět jako pramen životní síly”¹⁴ (Memory as the source of life force) where he wrote mainly about the (im)possibility of living in the present, and highlighted the most significant theme of the play for him, that of memory.¹⁵ However, in a review from *Právo* a theatre critic argued that the themes that Königsmark wrote about in the article were not really present in the production itself.¹⁶ An article which reappeared in almost all programme brochures, unfortunately, as usually happens in the Czech context, without stating the original source, was the article about the Lughnasa Festival. This article was translated almost word for word from the Abbey programme brochure, without referring to it. Czech programme brochures also included information about Brian Friel and his work, and the Abbey Theatre. Some attempted to capture a sense of Irishness by quoting Irish poems and sayings, and including photographs of the Irish countryside, Celtic crosses and other Celtic

¹² In conversation with the author, 25 March 2013.

¹³ In conversation with the author, 25 March 2013.

¹⁴ Václav Königsmark, “Pamět jako pramen životní síly,” Programme brochure for *Dancing at Lughnasa* produced by Divadlo na Vinohradech, 1993.

¹⁵ Königsmark.

¹⁶ [el] “Hra současného irského dramatika v Divadle na Vinohradech: On a jeho tety,” *Právo* 20 April 1993.

symbols and motifs, as if the Irishness apparently missing in the production itself were present at least in the programme brochures. The brochure from Opava¹⁷ seems to be the most detailed, and was the only one providing extra information on the Celts and their other major festivals. Likewise, the programme brochure from Zlín¹⁸ attempts to provide extensive background information, even reprinting part of an interview with Brian Friel which was originally published in *Divadelní noviny*.

It could be stated that the quality of acting reflected the different types of theatres where *Dancing at Lughnasa* was staged in Ireland and in the Czech Republic. Whereas all the Irish productions were staged in Ireland's most famous and significant theatres, Czech productions were staged primarily in regional repertory theatres, with permanent ensembles. The system of permanent ensembles, no matter how convenient it can be for the actors, has several disadvantages, one being that a director has limited choice in the actors they can cast in their production. Moreover, the security actors can feel when they are members of a permanent ensemble may paradoxically have a negative influence on their career. In an interview for *Divadelní noviny*¹⁹, Friel himself comments on this issue:

I don't like repertory theatres with permanent ensembles. The certainty of long-term engagement with the theatre demotivates the actor. This was the case in a production of one of my plays in Stockholm. The actors simply did not enjoy the play, and they acted in it only because they were cast into the play as staff members. The production was harmed by this fact.²⁰

This is not to say that the acting in all Czech productions was of a low quality and the actors were not motivated – on the contrary, many reviewers were of the opinion that several performances, as well as the ensemble interplay, were brilliant. However, compared to the actors from Irish productions, Czech actors may overall have been less professional. Also, according to the profiles of the Irish actors in the programme brochures, it could be stated that all of them were either experienced professionals or young up-and-coming actors, which was undoubtedly reflected in the performances and the interplay between the actors. Their professionalism is reflected

¹⁷ Programme brochure for *Dancing at Lughnasa* produced by Slezské divadlo Opava, 2003.

¹⁸ Programme brochure for *Dancing at Lughnasa* produced by Městské divadlo Zlín, 2004.

¹⁹ As it was not possible to gain the original unpublished interview in English, it had to be translated back into English from Czech by the author.

²⁰ Vladimír Hulec, "Píšu anglicky pro Iry. An interview with Brian Friel," *Divadelní noviny* 4.19 (14 November 1995) 9.

in their positive reviews: David Nowlan writes: “The acting is magnificent, both individually and in ensemble.”²¹ Grant continues: “The challenge to the actors of having to realise such complex characterisations was also well met. The women in particular each succeeded in asserting their different natures.”²² Moreover, the most significant acting acclaim was given to Anita Reeves, who created the role of Maggie in the world premiere, was nominated for the Olivier Award, and received the Plays and Players Award for Best Supporting Actress.²³

The possibilities of the set design did not depend only on the ideas and talents of the various stage designers, but were undoubtedly also determined by the financial situation of hosting theatres. Joe Vanek's iconic design could not have been created had the financial resources of the Abbey Theatre been more limited. Once again, the fact that the Irish productions were staged at the major Irish theatres probably predetermined also the financial possibilities. On the other hand many of the Czech regional theatres had more likely to cope with a shortage of financial means. As a result set designs in Czech productions appeared much more modest and simple. Despite the more straitened circumstances, however, in some Czech productions certain aspects of the set design were highly inventive and effective, such as the roof used as a setting for the dance scenes with Gerry and Chris in production in Opava²⁴, or the significant sprung platforms in the production in Zlín.²⁵

Another difference between Irish and Czech productions lies in the importance of choreography. The dance scenes and choreography in the Irish productions were arguably of greater quality and were described enthusiastically in all the reviews. Although the famous dance scene was also considered a highlight of some Czech productions, it is apparent from Czech reviews that it did not reach the quality of the Irish productions. Moreover, in some reviews the dance scenes were even severely criticised.²⁶ The significance of dance was not so apparent in Czech productions – for instance the director Jan Burian was criticised for turning *Dancing at Lughnasa* into a conversational play, reflecting a misunderstanding of Friel's

²¹ David Nowlan, “*Dancing at Lughnasa*, Abbey Theatre,” *The Irish Times*, Thursday 10 June 1999.

²² Richard Pine, David Grant and Derek West, “*Dancing at Lughnasa*,” *Theatre Ireland*, Vol. 22, May 1990: 9 – 10.

²³ Colin Kerr, “The Friel Thing,” *News of the World* June 13 1999.

²⁴ Jaroslava Šiktancová, in conversation with the author, 25 March 2013.

²⁵ Luboš Mareček, “I ve Zlíně tančí na konci léta,” *Divadelní noviny* 13.7 (2004) 5.

intention. In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Friel actually attempted to explore the possibilities of non-verbal theatre²⁷, and therefore dance should be an important and determining factor in any production of the play, as was the case of the world premiere, which West describes in the following words:

Choreographer Terry John Bates gives life to the moments that depend on the suspension of language and the revelation of emotion through movement. In the first act it is the torridly exciting dance of the sisters – akin to what Kavanagh called the cries of “fillies in season” - as they follow Maggie into the abandonment of inhibition and an unabashed declaration of sexuality, which is rendered devastated by their subsequent collapse into self-consciousness. In Act 2 it is the seductive moves of Gerry that draw the sisters into his charms.²⁸

Music is another extremely important feature of Friel's play. He makes sure to prescribe very carefully the type of music used in particular scenes. Although traditional Irish music was not the only style of music present in the play and a lot of space was given to (especially American) dance music from 1930s, it is the well-known Mason's Apron which is habitually chosen to accompany the famous dance scene. Whereas in Ireland the audience was undoubtedly familiar with this piece, they were less so in the Czech Republic. However, it could be argued that it was traditional Irish music that contributed to the success of the play in the Czech Republic, as Irish music, as well as Irish dance and Irish culture in general, became very popular in the Czech Republic in the 1990s.

Regardless of differences in the approach to the play, and the differences in the quality of the various individual aspects of productions, both Irish and Czech stagings could be considered highly successful across the board. In the Czech Republic, this play undoubtedly contributed to the popularity of Irish drama, while also discovering Brian Friel for the Czech stage. After the success of *Dancing at Lughnasa* and its subsequent frequent productions, Friel's other plays, namely *Translations*²⁹, *After Play*³⁰, *The Loves of Cass McGuire*³¹ and *Faith Healer*³² finally

²⁶ Sloupová 116.

²⁷ Tony Corbett, *Brian Friel. Decoding the Language of the Tribe* (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2002) 63.

²⁸ Richard Pine, David Grant and Derek West, “*Dancing at Lughnasa*” *Theatre Ireland* 22 (May 1990) 11.

²⁹ *Proměny*, director Nancy Bishop, Black Box Theatre, premiere 21 April; *Proměny*, director Jakub Špalek, Divadelní spolek Kašpar Praha, premiere 5 May 1997. (Source: the database of the Municipal Library of Prague, Theatre department).

³⁰ *Afterplay*, director Jiří Pokorný, Divadlo na Zábřadlí, premiere 10 September 2004. (Source: the database of the Municipal Library of Prague, Theatre department).

started to appear on the Czech stage.

Regrettably, the research of the reception of *Dancing at Lughnasa* among the audience could not be undertaken, as there were no professional productions in Ireland in 2009 or in the Czech Republic during the time this thesis was being written. When the play is staged in the future, the missing research might be completed. This would consist of sociological research of the audience (where the information would be collected through the method of questionnaires) and interviews with theatre practitioners. The results of this additional suggested research could help to find further approaches to analysing *Dancing at Lughnasa* more than twenty years after its premiere. Ideally, the research would be based on two productions, which would run in Ireland and in the Czech Republic in the same time period and would be comparable in terms of the quality and significance of the theatre in both contexts.

³¹ *Lásky paní Katty*, director Vladimír Strnisko, Divadlo na Vinohradech, premiere 27 February 2004; *Lásky paní Katty*, director Vladimír Strnisko, Divadlo na Jezerce, 3 October 2005. (Source: the database of the Municipal Library of Prague, Theatre department).

³² *Léčitel*, director Filip Nuckolls, Činoherní studio Ústí nad Labem 16 October 2012, Divadlo Petra Bezruče Ostrava, 17 October 2012, Divadelní spolek Kašpar – Divadlo v Celetné Praha 18 October 2012. (Source: the database of the Municipal Library of Prague, Theatre Department)

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: List of Significant Irish Productions of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, April 1990 – October 2010¹

Theatre	Director	Year	Premiere
The Abbey Theatre, Dublin	Patrick Mason	1990, 1991	24 April 1990
The Lyric Theatre, Belfast	Conall Morrison	1996	Not found
The Abbey Theatre, Dublin	Patrick Mason	1999	9 June 1999
Splódar Theatre Company	Mairead McGrath	2002	Not found
The Gate Theatre, Dublin	Joe Dowling	2004	24 February 2004
The Lyric Theatre, Belfast	Mick Gordon	2007	1 June 2007
Second Age Theatre Company	David Horan	2010	21 October 2010

¹ Main sources: the databases of the Abbey Theatre Archive, Dublin, the Linen Hall Library (the seat of the Archive of the Lyric Theatre, Belfast) and James Hardiman Library, National University of Ireland, Galway and the website of the Irish Theatre Institute.

Appendix 2: List of Significant Productions of *Dancing at Lughnasa* in the Czech Republic, April 1990 – January 2011²

Theatre	Director	Year	Premiere
Divadlo na Vinohradech	Jan Burian	1993	19 March 1993
Státní divadlo Ostrava Divadlo Antonína Dvořáka	Peter Gábor	1993	30 October 1993
Divadlo J.K.Tyla v Plzni	Jan Burian	1994	26 February 1994
Východočeské divadlo (Pardubice)	Jana Kališová	1994	9 April 1994
Vyšší odborná škola herecká Branické divadlo (Praha)	Slávka Hozová	1999	15 January 1999
Vyšší odborná škola herecká Pídivadlo (Praha)	Ondřej Zajíc	2002	10 September 2002
Slezské divadlo (Opava)	Jaroslava Šiktancová	2003	30 March 2003
Naše Dobrovolné Divadelní Družstvo Divadlo v Celetné (Praha)	Jiří Bábek	2003	29 April 2003
Městské divadlo Zlín	Ivan Balad'a	2004	14 February 2004
Městské divadlo Most	Alexandr Galperin	2009	18 February 2009
Vyšší odborná škola herecká Pídivadlo (Praha)	Kateřina Macháčková	2011	28 January 2011

² Main source: the database of the Theatre Institute in Prague.

Appendix 3: Significant Irish Productions of *Dancing at Lughnasa*: Casts and Artistic Teams

The World Premiere of *Dancing at Lughnasa* at the Abbey Theatre, 1990

Cast

Kate – Frances Tomelty

Maggie – Anita Reeves

Rose – Brid Ni Neachtain

Agnes – Brid Brennan

Chris – Catherine Bryne

Michael – Gerald McSorley

Gerry – Paul Herzberg

Jack – Barry McGovern

Artistic Team

Director: Patrick Mason

Designer: Joe Vanek

Lighting: Trevor Dawson

Choreographer: Terry John Bates

Premiere 24th April 1990

***Dancing at Lughnasa* at the Lyric Theatre, 1996**

Cast

Kate – Nuala Hayes

Maggie – Aine McCartney

Rose – Cathy White

Agnes – Paula McFetridge

Chris – Eileen McCloskey

Michael – Niall Cusack

Gerry – David Howarth

Jack – Roy Hanlon

Artistic Team

Director: Conall Morrison

Designer: Stuart Marshall

Lighting: John Riddell

Choreographer: David Bolger

Dancing at Lughnasa – revival at the Abbey Theatre, 1999

Cast

Kate – Anita Reeves

Maggie – Anna Healy

Rose – Lynn Cahill

Agnes – Jane Brennan

Chris – Ali White

Michael – David Parnell

Gerry – Steven Elliott

Jack – Des Cave

Artistic Team

Director: Patrick Mason

Designer: Joe Vanek

Lighting: Trevor Dawson

Choreographer: Terry John Bates

Premiere 9th June 1999

Dancing at Lughnasa at the Gate Theatre, 2004

Cast

Kate – Andrea Irvine

Maggie – Derbhle Crotty

Rose – Dawn Bradfield

Agnes – Catherine Walsh

Chris – Aisling O'Neill

Michael – Peter Gowen

Gerry – Ben Price

Jack – John Kavanagh

Artistic Team

Director: Joe Dowling

Designer: Robert Jones

Lighting: Rupert Murray

Premiere 24th February 2004

Dancing at Lughnasa at the Lyric Theatre, 2007

Cast

Kate – Geraldine Fitzgerald

Maggie – Patricia Gannon

Rose – Mairead McKinley

Agnes – Aislin McGuckin

Chris – Laura Donnelly

Michael – Sean Sloan

Gerry – Rhydian Jones

Jack – Gerard McSorley

Artistic Team

Director: Mick Gordon

Designer: Ferdia Murphy

Lighting: Ian Scott

Choreographer: Deborah Maguire

Premiere 1st June 2007

Appendix 4: Significant Productions of *Dancing at Lughnasa* in the Czech Republic: Casts and Artistic Teams

The Czech Premiere of *Dancing at Lughnasa* at Divadlo na Vinohradech, 1993

Cast

Kate – Marta Vančurová

Maggie – Daniela Kolářová

Rose (Róza) – Kateřina Brožová

Agnes – Hana Maciuchová

Chris (Krista) – Lucie Juříčková

Michael – Jiří Čapka

Gerry – Svatopluk Skopal

Jack – Radoslav Brzobohatý

Artistic Team

Director: Jan Burian

Designer: Karel Glogr

Choreographer: Pavel Šmok (guest)

Costumes: Dana Hávová (guest)

Music: Petr Kofroň

Dramaturgy: Václav Königsmark

Premiere 19th March 1993

***Dancing at Lughnasa* at Státní divadlo Ostrava, Divadlo Antonína Dvořáka, 1993**

Cast

Kate – Veronika Forejtová

Maggie – Alena Sasínová-Polarczyk

Rose (Róza) – Pavlína Kafková

Agnes – Anna Cónová

Chris (Krista) – Marie Logojdová

Michael – Milan Kačmarčík

Gerry – Pavel Nečas

Jack – Milan Šulc

Artistic Team

Director: Peter Gábor (guest)

Designer: Ivan Hudák (guest)

Choreographer: Libuše Králová

Costumes: Judita Lisová (guest)

Music: Peter Vaňouček (guest)

Literary manager: Vojtěch Kabeláč

Premiere 30th October 1993

***Dancing at Lughnasa* at Divadlo J.K.Tyla v Plzni, 1994**

Cast

Kate – Monika Švábová
Maggie – Ilona Vaňková
Rose (Róza) – Kateřina Hrachovcová
Agnes – Inka Brendlová
Chris (Krista) – Jana Matiašková
Michael – Josef Nechutný
Gerry – Pavel Kikinčuk
Jack – Pavel Pavlovský

Artistic Team

Director: Jan Burian
Designer: Karel Glogr
Choreographer: Eva Popotrandovská
Costumes: Dana Hávová
Music: Petr Kofroň
Literary manager: Marie Caltová
Lighting: Karel Glogr
Translator: Ota Ornest

Premiere 26th February 1994

***Dancing at Lughnasa* at Slezské Divadlo Opava, 2004**

Cast

Kate – Ivana Petrželová
Maggie – Lenka Waxlawiecová
Rose (Róza) – Sabina Figarová
Agnes – Hana Vaňková
Chris (Krista) – Kateřina Volná
Michael – Ladislav Špiner
Gerry – Marek Kunc
Jack – Petr Klimeš

Artistic Team

Director: Jaroslava Šiktancová
(guest)
Designer: Libuše Josefý (guest)
Choreography: Martin Pacek j.h.,
Tereza Bernardová (guest)
Costumes: Libuše Josefý (guest)
Music: Radůza
Literary manager: Ladislav Slíva
Translator: Ota Ornest

Premiere 30th March 2003

***Dancing at Lughnasa* at Městské divadlo Zlín, 2004**

Cast

Kate – Zdena Kružíková

Maggie – Milena Marciliová

Agnes – Romana Julinová

Rose – Petra Hřebíčková

Chris – Tereza Jakubíková

Michael – Rostislav Marek

Gerry – Radovan Král

Jack – Dušan Sitek

Artistic Team

Director: Ivan Balad'a (guest)

Designer: Sylva Marková (guest)

Choreography: Hana Charvátová
(guest)

Costumes: Sylva Marková (guest)

Music: Richard Dvořák

Dramaturgy: Jana Markova

Premiere 14th February 2004