

BRIAN FRIEL: THE MASTER PLAYWRIGHT

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Abstract:

Brian Friel has long been recognized as Ireland's leading playwright. His work for the theatre spans almost fifty years and his reputation has expanded well beyond Ireland. In January 2009 Friel turned eighty and only a few months before, his adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, opened at the Gate Theatre Dublin on 30th September 2008. This article will first provide a survey of Brian Friel's remarkable career, trying to assess his overall contribution to Irish theatre, before looking at his various adaptations to finally focus on *Hedda Gabler*, its place and relevance in the author's canon.

Keywords: Brian Friel, Irish Theatre, Hedda Gabler, Adaptation, Ireland.

Brian Friel has long been recognized as the leading playwright in contemporary Ireland. His work for the theatre spans almost fifty years and his reputation has expanded beyond Ireland and outside the English-speaking world, where several of his plays are regularly produced, studied and enjoyed by a wide range of audiences and critics. In January 2009, Brian Friel turned eighty and only a few months before, his adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*,¹ opened at the Gate

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Theatre Dublin on 30th September 2008 as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival. This article will first provide a survey of Brian Friel's remarkable career, trying to assess his overall contribution to Irish theatre, before looking at his various adaptations to finally focus on *Hedda Gabler*, its place and relevance in the author's canon.

Brian Friel was born in Omagh, Northern Ireland, on 9th January 1929. His family moved to Derry, the second largest city in Northern Ireland in 1939, where his father soon became involved in local politics, as a member of the Nationalist Party. Friel's mother's family had roots across the border, in County Donegal, and the young Brian spent many holidays in and around Glenties, his mother's "home place", which Friel was to transmute into his emblematic fictional Ballybeg, the chosen location of so many of his dramatic works.² Both the wild landscapes of rural Donegal and the sectarian, divided city of London/Derry shaped Friel's mental geography and were to exert a lasting influence on his sensibility and imagination. Brian Friel went to Maynooth to study for the priesthood but gave up after two years of what he called "an awful experience" (qtd. in Lennon 9) and instead became a teacher, like his father. The critic and journalist Fintan O'Toole has convincingly argued that Friel's recognition that he could not become a priest led to his embracing writing as a career within which he could embark on a different spiritual quest ("Tracing a Rocky Path from the Past" 4). Now married to Anne Morrisson and with a young family, Brian Friel started to write short-stories in the late 1950s and enjoyed real success with that medium, writing for American magazines, notably *The New Yorker*, and also having two collections published in 1962 and 1966.³ Brian Friel gave up short-story writing in the mid 1960s to devote himself entirely to drama. His early radio plays, and his first major stage effort, *The Enemy Within*, attracted the attention of Sir Tyrone Guthrie, an immensely innovative director and a Monaghan man, who invited him to Minneapolis in March 1963 to spend a few months in the new theatre he was launching there.⁴ This very fruitful "apprenticeship" allowed Friel to have his first direct experience of the business of theatre, as

opposed to playwriting as a more literary pursuit, and upon his return to Ireland he went on to write his first major play, *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, the success of the 1964 Dublin Theatre Festival. *Philadelphia* displayed several of the qualities Friel was to keep developing, and it has remained an important play in Ireland where it is still performed regularly on major stages. Thematically rather conventional, with a plot hinging on a difficult father/son relationship, the grief and vulnerability of a boy whose mother died in childbirth, the boredom of small-town life, the lure of emigration to the US, it contains many ingredients that could have been found in various plays of the 1950s. The major breakthrough was the dramatic device of a character split between two protagonists and actors, Gar Public and Gar Private. In this way, Friel dramatised most effectively and illuminatingly the schizophrenic condition of a whole culture as well as making full use of a wonderful theatrical device that energised the stage business and enlivened the dialogue. This split character can equally be seen as something of a red thread in Friel's understanding of the individual as defined by fragmentation, an incapacity to experience wholeness or ontological integrity. The ability to find a form adequate to this condition of existence is very much a hallmark of Friel's artistry.

In the wake of this early success, Friel wrote several more plays in the late 1960s, though none matched *Philadelphia* in terms of popular appeal: *The Loves of Cass McGuire* (which did also transfer to Broadway), *Lovers*, made up of two short plays, "Winners" and "Losers" and the darker, deeply disturbing *Crystal and Fox*. These plays, which all very much focused on different types of love and relationships, were followed in the late 1960s and through the 1970s by works that tackled more openly political and social issues. *The Mundy Scheme* (1969) saw Friel venture into political satire. This play occupies a place apart in that it is the only piece the author has refused to have reprinted or produced since the original, very short run at the Olympia Theatre. For all its real flaws (and Friel is his harshest critic) *The Mundy Scheme* provides evidence that the playwright could move from the

humour present in the early plays to a darker, more savage comedy, critical of the whole emerging political culture of the new Ireland. It cannot be doubted that Friel was in part reacting to a more sombre and violent context as Northern Ireland was plunging into open and extreme sectarian violence. For Brian Friel, himself a member of the disenfranchised Catholic, Nationalist community of the North, such tragic events could not but have a profound effect, on him personally but also on his writing and imagination. The outside world was impinging on the private, inner core. *The Gentle Island* (1971) still eschewed dealing directly with the “troubles” but after Bloody Sunday (30th January 1972), Friel penned *The Freedom of the City* (1973), his first play to address forcefully the deteriorating situation in Northern Ireland. The play was staged in London with a talented Irish actor, Stephen Rea, in the role of the mercurial Skinner and this first meeting between the two men would pave the way for a later fruitful partnership. *Volunteers* (1975), a much unjustly neglected play, kept a strong focus on contemporary violence with a prison setting this time south of the border in the Republic and an intertextual dialogue with Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Both *The Gentle Island* and *Volunteers* are also evidence of Friel’s growing fascination with the role of stories and storytelling, the lie and the consoling fiction an individual or a community may tell himself/itself and others. Further probing the elusiveness and unreliability of memory, *Living Quarters* (1977) owed a huge debt to Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and marked an effort to move away from the overtly political while pursuing the earlier inquiries into the dubious nature of “fact”, in the private, as well as the public spheres.

1979-1981 proved an amazingly fruitful period for Brian Friel with the premieres of no less than three exceptional plays, *Aristocrats*, *Faith Healer* and *Translations*. *Aristocrats*, the first of Friel’s plays to be labelled Chekhovian by critics and audiences, was based on his short-story “Foundry House” and further explored fraught father/children relationships, this time in a Big House setting. *Faith Healer* occupies a

place apart in the Friel canon. Composed of four monologues delivered by three characters, two of whom are already dead, it is a theatrical and emotional *tour de force* which many contemporary critics failed to appreciate. It took the superb, awe-inspiring impersonation of Frank Hardy by the late Donal McCann in the Dublin production for the play to be recognised for what it is, a masterpiece. *Translations* saw Friel venture for the first time into the "history play" genre. *Translations* proved the starting point of a major evolution in Irish theatre and intellectual history with the launch of the Field Day Theatre Company. Brian Friel and Belfast-born actor Stephen Rea decided to put together an *ad hoc* company and persuaded the Mayor of Derry to lend them the (in)famous Guildhall as a theatre space; after the Derry première, the play would tour Ireland, North and South, bringing theatre to small towns and in the process largely ignoring the partition between the North and the Republic, thereby making a clear political statement as well as an artistic intervention. As *Translations* was performed to huge acclaim and audiences, Friel and Rea decided Field Day should have a board of directors. Poets and critics Seamus Deane and Tom Paulin, poet Seamus Heaney, and musician and folklorist David Hammond were co-opted, giving the company a deliberate Northern slant and the potential to expand its activities outside of the theatre—which they soon did.⁵ Field Day went on touring for several years and Friel wrote four of the plays produced, becoming in the process of co-chairing the company, more directly involved in the business of the theatre, its day-to-day workings, exhilaration and niggling disappointments.

It was for Field Day that he wrote his first adaptation from Anton Chekhov, *Three Sisters* in 1981; the following year, *The Communication Cord* showed Friel could successfully handle farce and revisit the emotive issues of *Translations* in a completely different mode. Soon, the playwright found the demands on his time and energy required by his commitment to Field Day's often controversial activities and publications/productions increasingly incompatible with his own writing.

One may also imagine, as various critics have suggested, that finding himself in the role of public spokesman of a cultural movement must have embarrassed a man as intensely private as Brian Friel. He returned to a Russian classic, this time Turgenev's novel, *Fathers and Sons*, which he adapted in 1987, and *Making History* (1988) saw him back in excellent writing form for a renewed foray into the history play genre. Brian Friel remained loyal to the company until the publication of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, the brainchild of Seamus Deane and an amazing achievement by any standard, but he decided to give his new original play, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, not to Field Day for their 1990 tour, but to the Abbey Theatre. In what was a rather unusual move, he also approached Patrick Mason and asked him to direct the play, on the strength of his credentials in physical theatre (Tom McIntyre's *The Great Hunger* in particular) and opera direction. *Dancing at Lughnasa* proved a huge success, in Ireland and the world over, winning countless awards. Once again, Friel combined formal innovation with the best dramatic writing and caught the mood of the times perfectly. In early 1994, Friel officially resigned from Field Day.⁶

It must be admitted that none of the five original plays written since *Dancing at Lughnasa* have matched the latter's near-miraculous elegance and emotion. *Wonderful Tennessee* (1993), *Molly Sweeney* (1994), *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* (1997), *Performances* (2003), and *The Home Place* (2005) nonetheless demonstrate a great diversity thematically and formally, though one could discern a renewed probing into the complex connection between life and art which had been at the core of *Faith Healer*. *Wonderful Tennessee* was one of the few critical and popular failures in Friel's long career but it pointedly spoke of the need for spirituality at the time when Irish society was fast becoming de-christianised and embracing materialism on a scale hitherto unknown with the beginning of the Celtic Tiger era. *Molly Sweeney*, which Friel decided to direct himself, revisited with variations the monologue form of *Faith Healer* and the issues addressed almost a century earlier by Synge's *The Well of the Saints*, this time taking its

cue from a recent and fascinating case-study by neurologist Oliver Sacks, "To See and not to See" (102-114). A blind but competent, happy, self-reliant Molly is offered a chance to have the operation that will give her back her sight. Far from being a miraculous cure, her new vision causes her to feel alienated from both the world of the seeing with which she cannot connect and the world of the blind she can no longer inhabit. Molly's descent into depression challenges our assumptions about a stable reality independent from our perception and expression of it. *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* addressed the value of a body of work, querying the link between artistic value and financial and academic recognition. Coming as it did shortly after Friel decided not to give his archive to the highest (American academic) bidder but instead to donate it to the National Library of Ireland, this play resonates with very personal concerns and anxieties, hinting at the private cost for the artist and his family of preserving artistic integrity and the danger for art when the public sphere becomes too inhospitable to the artist. *Performances* pursues the exploration of T.S. Eliot's distinction between the man and the artist, artistic success and personal failure, using composer Leos Janacek as the main protagonist. This ghost play also enabled Friel to place live music centrestage with a string quartet among the actors. *The Home Place* in 2005 came as a surprise, since Friel returned to the history play genre, offering a belated companion piece to both *Aristocrats* (the Big House setting) and *Translations*. *The Home Place* deserves a place apart in the Friel canon as it is his first play to engage directly with the Protestant community through the plight of an Anglo-Irish Ascendancy family on the eve of the Land War in the 1870s.

Friel's œuvre displays both continuities and discontinuities in formal and thematic terms, returning time and again to the interplay between the private and the public, the unreliability of memory and the constructedness of history, the fragmentation of identity, the fallibility of language, the role of art and the artist in the community in times of crisis and in a modern world impatient with, or bereft of,

transcendence and spirituality. It also demonstrates a quality often remarked upon by audiences and critics alike, an ability to renew, challenge, surprise, innovate, even at such a late stage in a long career. It now remains for us to chart Friel's continued interest in adaptations in order to understand the place this particular form of writing has taken up in his work in the last two decades.

Friel's Adaptations

It was for Field Day that Friel wrote his first adaptation of a Russian classic, Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters* in 1981 though he had toyed with the idea of adapting this famous play before Field Day ever came into existence; there is clear evidence that his work on *Three Sisters* influenced the writing of *Translations* before Field Day was even conceived. Field Day's production in 1981 was a bold, defining move which won Friel and the company admirers as well as detractors. That Brian Friel had long enjoyed a special relationship with Chekhov is abundantly clear and well-documented, arguably going back to the early experience with Tyrone Guthrie in Minneapolis.⁷ Richard Pine has called Friel the Irish Chekhov (1) and no one has thought to challenge this claim. Further adaptations followed, with a marked Russian inflection: *Fathers and Sons* (1987) and *A Month in the Country* (1992), both after Turgenev, *Uncle Vanya* (1998), *Three Plays After: The Yalta Game* (2001), *The Bear* and *Afterplay* (2002) after Chekhov and finally *Hedda Gabler* (2008), after Henrik Ibsen. One could detect an almost regular pattern in that Friel seems to have produced an adaptation every five or six years since he started in 1981, with a shorter lapse of time between *Uncle Vanya* and *Three Plays After*. In 2008, together with their friends the Kilroys, Anne and Brian Friel went to Yalta on a pilgrimage of a kind, to visit the two homes of the Russian master; Kilroy concludes his piece on the visit thus: "I thought of the great European confluence flowing in and through Brian's work and why it is that he belongs in this company" (1). Friel has indeed kept

imaginative company with Chekhov throughout most of his writing career and in looking at the ways in which their dialogue has evolved, one must begin with *Three Sisters*.

Adaptations are a staple of the theatre diet everywhere. Countless playwrights adapt classic or contemporary foreign texts in what is arguably a perfectly routine activity, designed to counter the effects of time (reminding contemporary audiences of older texts), of place (bringing texts from outside to local audiences), and of linguistic difference (making accessible texts written in a different language). Adaptation may also involve a crossing from one literary genre (the novel) into another (drama). But such moves are fraught with consequences and raise important issues as far as what can be carried over, into a different language, culture, era, environment is concerned. There is no denying that the adaptations Friel did for *Field Day*⁸ implied a deliberate intention to deal with the ideological function of language in general and the place of Irish-English, or Hiberno-English in relation to standard English in an Irish context. Many of the stakes could apply equally well to other geographic and cultural areas where standard English and other non-standard forms coexist. *Field Day* staged a number of adaptations, some by Friel, others by Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin and Derek Mahon and Frank McGuinness. In an oft-quoted interview, Friel explained some of the reasons which led him to write his own adaptation of Chekhov:

I came to *After Babel* because I was doing a translation of *Three Sisters*. Although I do not speak a word of Russian, I had been working on this play with the help of five standard English translations. It was a kind of act of love, but after a while I began to wonder exactly what I was doing. I think *Three Sisters* is a very important play, but I feel that the translations which we have received and inherited in some way have not much to do with the language which we speak in Ireland. [...] Somehow the rhythms of these versions do

not match with the rhythms of our own speech patterns, and I think that they ought to, in some way. ... This is something about which I feel strongly – in some way we are constantly overshadowed by the sound of English language, as well as by the printed word. Maybe this does not inhibit us, but it forms us and shapes us in a way that is neither healthy nor valuable for us. (qtd. in Agnew 59)

Thus it was in order to give Chekhov a voice adapted to the Irish stage and to an Irish audience that Friel performed this “act of love” and engaged in dialogue with the Russian master who had already so powerfully engaged his imagination and influenced his own work. Friel’s *Three Sisters* retains the original Russian setting and characters but gives the characters an Irish turn of phrase, a choice which has left him open to the traditional charge of parochialism, of somehow provincialising a play of universal appeal. Yet in many ways Friel gave a new impetus to adaptations in Ireland and soon Frank McGuinness and Thomas Kilroy, to name but two other great dramatists, offered versions of foreign classics on Irish stages, including several Chekhov plays.

As various critics have noted, Friel tends to define his characters more precisely than Chekhov, to give them more to say, turning monologues into dialogues, sometimes at the risk of suggesting the possibility of more communication than in the original while preserving the subtle balance between comedy and sadness. Friel’s 1998 version of *Uncle Vanya* makes use of the same devices but also alters the play in a more obvious way by developping two minor characters, Maria Voynitsky and Telegin, into sustained comic roles. “*Three Sisters* and *Uncle Vanya* stop. The characters must go on living, but robbed now of hope. [...] Friel knows that there is no closure for Chekhov’s characters. Their unsatisfied lives will–must–go on” remarks Robert Tracy (75). *Afterplay* (2002) proceeds from that sense that while dramatic action stops, as it must, the characters’ lives do continue off stage and Friel’s short piece boldly combines what in modern television parlance would be known as both “a sequel” and

"a cross-over". Sonya Serebriakova (from *Uncle Vanya*) meets Andrey Prozorov (from *Three Sisters*) in a Moscow café and in the course of their conversation over a poor meal both try to conceal their deep unhappiness and frustrated hopes, before confessing the disappointments of their lives. In the author's note, Friel defines himself as "something less than a parent ... something more than a foster parent. Maybe closer to a god-parent who takes his responsibilities scrupulously" (*Three Plays After* 69), an apt description of his role, developing existing dramatic creatures, endowing them with an afterlife. Equally apparent was Friel's determination in *Afterplay* to ignore the historical context in which his characters would have met, that of revolutionary Russia. To a certain extent, one could argue that by turning his hand exclusively at adaptations or quasi-adaptations between 1997 and 2005, Friel was also refusing to engage directly with the matter of a changing Ireland and a Northern Ireland in transition after the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. Scott Boltwood has made a convincing case for such a diversionary tactic, which came to an end with *The Home Place*, and the return to Ballybeg (196-198). Yet what followed in 2008 was a new adaptation, this time from Ibsen, though Friel had long considered remaining on Russian territory and adapting Gogol or Tolstoy.

Friel's *Hedda Gabler*

After his long "privileged conversation" (*The Seagull* 13) with Chekhov, and also with Chekhov's predecessor, Turgenev, Friel with his most recent play has turned his sights to Norway and Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), often referred to as the father of modern drama:

In the English-speaking world today Henrik Ibsen has become one of the three major classics of the theatre: Shakespeare, Chekhov and Ibsen are at the very centre of the standard repertoire. [...] Ibsen can thus be seen as one of

the principal creators and well-springs of the whole modern movement in drama, having contributed to the development of all its diverse and often seemingly opposed and contradictory manifestations: the ideological and political theatre, as well as the introspective, introverted trends which tend towards the representation of inner realities and dreams. (Esslin 71, 73)

Hedda Gabler was first performed in 1890, which makes the play broadly contemporary with the setting of *The Home Place* in 1878, and in theatre history with the development of the Abbey Theatre in Ireland. It is worth remembering that Edward Martyn was the only avowed admirer of Ibsen among the founders of the Irish Literary Theatre; Synge was doubtful of Ibsen's (and realist theatre's) ability to express what he called the "reality of life" and wary of the "joyless and pallid words" of his dramatic dialogue. But the same Ibsen was claimed by Chekhov as "his favourite writer" (qtd. in Esslin 71),⁹ which would undoubtedly have endeared him to Friel. Tom Kilroy, fellow playwright and close friend of Brian Friel's, adapted *Ghosts* for the Peacock in 1989, and Frank McGuinness did *Peer Gynt* in 1988 at the Gate which was revived at the Royal National Theatre in October 2000. In 2006 the Abbey received, as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival International, a version of *Hedda Gabbler* by Thomas Ostermeier and it seems Brian Friel was approached by the Gate's director, Michael Colgan, to adapt the play. A number of parallels and echoes can easily be identified: both playwrights have a complex relationship with realism as a mode and with the real as a concept; both believe in the life of the mind; one could find an echo of Ibsen's "saving lie" in Friel's "consoling fictions". Both writers in their different ways demonstrate an awareness of the complex interactions between the private, inner core of the self and the public world (family, society) that determines, and impinges on, it.

Yet it is not any Ibsen text that Friel chose to adapt, but *Hedda Gabler*, a play dominated by the highly ambiguous eponymous heroine. Friel's text was well-served by a strong production for the Gate by

English director Anna Mackmin – who did Ibsen's *Ghosts* in 2007 and *Dancing at Lughnasa* at the Old Vic, London, in the spring of 2009 – with Justine Mitchell giving a remarkable performance as Hedda. This was the first play Friel had entrusted, in its original production, to the care of a woman director. The setting conveyed a strong sense of imprisonment with Hedda trapped as in a glass cage and an eerie music suggestive of ghosts and hauntings. As in earlier adaptations, Friel adds more than he subtracts, expanding the range of several characters to suit his purpose, George Tesman and Judge Brack being cases in point here; but there is little sign that the playwright wants the characters to assert a strong Irish identity through language and accents despite the presence of some Irishisms; archaisms have been dropped and the language has been energized and on occasion modernized, which will no doubt raise some eyebrows but makes for a livelier text. I will approach Friel's version of *Hedda Gabler* from two complementary but distinct angles. First the focus will be on gender politics in the original and the adaptation before turning to Friel's personal, intertextual engagement with Ibsen's text.

Much of the criticism of *Hedda Gabler*, both when it was first performed and since, has concentrated on Hedda herself. She is a cypher, something of an enigma that actresses and directors have sought to understand or embody.¹⁰ Two comments by Ibsen may guide this necessarily limited exploration of the character: "Hedda really wants to live the whole life of a man" (qtd. in programme notes for Gate production) and "For Hedda, life is a farce which isn't worth seeing through to the end" (qtd. in Billington). At the play's opening we discover that Hedda has moved from the role of single young woman courted by suitors to that of young bride, though her decision to marry was not motivated by a romantic interest but by a sense of possibilities running out, a fear of finding herself left on the shelf:

I married him because I had danced myself to a standstill.
Because—may I be melodramatic judge? – because I had an

instinct things had come to an end for me, that it was all played out. So in panic, despair maybe, I latched on to what was stable and dependable. (HG 43)

The husband she has chosen is George Tesman, an ambitious academic, from a bourgeois background, cosseted by his two spinster aunts and delighted with his good fortune at having married the beautiful and aristocratic Hedda. That this is an ill-assorted match is made immediately obvious. In sharp contrast with George Tesman, who revels in the close emotional and physical contact he has with his aunts, Hedda shuns intimacy, domesticity and perhaps equally importantly, maternity. In many ways, the gender roles are reversed, all the more so as Friel "feminizes" Tesman through the addition of two comic moments and speeches relating to the domestic, the intimate. Like Elena in *Uncle Vanya* with whom she bears a passing resemblance, Hedda is defined, from the start, by her beauty. For aunt Juliana however, this beauty comes to life only when it is associated with a possible pregnancy, an inference that Hedda finds offensive, largely because she cannot imagine becoming a mother. The physical repulsion, manifest when Juliana kisses her, hardens when George suggests she should call Miss Tesman "Auntie Juju", a suggestion Hedda rejects with a stern "I will not be coerced", which is much stronger than the standard "You mustn't ask me to do that". Her utter refusal to engage with the domestic world of the Tesmans is rendered obvious and comical thanks to the addition of Tesman's long rapturous and ridiculous speech prompted by the vision of the slippers her aunt has embroidered for him: "Such skill – such artistry. Oh my goodness. This is a chronicle of my life Hedda; a record of my deepest emotions, my most opulent memories" (HG, 21). Hedda prefers the masculine world of ideas and pistols; she resents her husband's interference with her dangerous games and his mawkish plea—"For heaven's sake Hedda, don't even touch those awful things (HG, 39) goes unheeded. She cannot accept his suggestion that she would have difficulty understanding Loeborg's book, or indeed that she should devote her attention to making their new house a home.

That they now inhabit the house of her dreams is merely a “damned fiction [that] has hardened into fact” (HG, 47), a lie that has misfired badly and has left her trapped. She bullies Thea, flirts with Judge Brack and challenges Loevborg to drink and commit suicide. In a neat reversal of conventional roles, while maternity appals her as a prospect, the idea that his wife may be expecting a baby causes Tesman to become deliriously happy:

Now he is suddenly released – propelled – hurled into exaggerated, manic activity. He takes her hand, kisses it a dozen times, strokes his face with it and then returns it formerly to her lap. He drops on his knees and salaams before her. He grabs a bundle of flowers and presents them to her. He takes several blooms and wreaths his head with them.... During all this extravaganza Hedda sits absolutely still, rigid, upright, her eyes closed tight, her face a mask. Throughout his buffoonery George pours out this commentary at top speed. (HG 89-90)

Such a scene, apart from providing a welcome moment of comic relief shortly before the tragic ending and an ironically literal version of the vine leaves Hedda had imagined around Loevborg’s head, also highlights the irreconcilable nature of the two characters: Hedda, cold and frightened of motherhood and what it would signify for her, Tesman’s childish joy at the prospect of becoming a father.

That *Hedda Gabler* partly dramatises a conflict between two societies, bourgeois (the Tesmans) and aristocratic (General Gabler) cannot be challenged. Friel even adds a social touch not present in Ibsen when Thea recalls: “And then you were the daughter of General Gabler and my father was a storeman on the docks. That was another chasm” (HG 29). Class difference was a key concern in *The Home Place*, with Richard the snob and Margaret left stranded between the village school of her father that she had rejected and the Manor she eventually, painfully realized she could not inhabit as *chatelaine*, only

as housekeeper. But in *Hedda Gabler* the social contrast between Hedda and the Tesmans, though not ignored, is not really played up; as for the opposition between Hedda and Thea, it would seem to depend less on their social origins than on their attitude to men and to available gender roles. Thea's part is expanded and she is given a long speech in which she explains, sensuously, in loving detail, how she fell in love with Loevborg and how their working relationship developed and turned into an all-consuming passion on her part: "I suddenly knew that I loved that weak, talented, damaged Eilert Loevborg ... yes. Loved him suddenly and fiercely and altogether without caution" (HG 32). This makes Thea more credible not merely as a do-gooder, the would-be reformer of a lost soul, the bored wife-housekeeper of a cantankerous old magistrate, but as a passionate woman capable of romantic love, ready to risk her status and reputation. Nothing could be further from Hedda's experience since her fear of scandal and of losing control seems to always prevent her from yielding to passion. However, departing from the relatively laconic use of language of the original Hedda, Friel's heroine is granted an ability to express passion linguistically, though not physically. Upon hearing that Loevborg is in town she paints a vivid picture that speaks volumes about what is missing in her life: "The man's on the rampage, for God's sake—triumphant, delirious with sudden success! He's being toasted by scores of old and new friends. Even as we sit here he's probably painting the town ... scarlet!" (HG 28); later, talking to Loevborg she confesses that in the days of their close friendship she lived vicariously, through him: "You were my tutor in all the delights and excesses and squalor. [...] And I experienced them all through you—in blushing secrecy, in absolute safety" (HG 57-58).

One may ascribe Hedda's decision to commit suicide to her acute awareness of the limitations of the gender roles available to her. Since she cannot or will not be a servant, an invalid, a caring spinster aunt, an affectionate wife, a mother, a dancer/prostitute or an adultress, Hedda cannot survive in the cage prepared for her by the men around her and a society whose values they do not dream of challenging. The final image of the Gate production emphasized the contrast between Hedda

and Thea as Mackmin chose to leave Thea on stage, clutching Loevborg's pages and hinting at a future in which she, like Tesman, will have a role to play, unlike Hedda. Whether this makes Thea "the inveterate social climber and moulder of men who is the arch manipulator of this claustrophobic play" as Emilie Pine suggests, comparing Thea with Chekhov's Natasha is harder to decide (32-38). But while Hedda comes to the conclusion that the farce that is her life must come to an end on her own terms, it is strongly suggested that Thea will adapt to her new circumstances and enjoy a new companionship with Tesman.

Reworking a play that focuses so strongly on the fate of a woman who wishes she could live like a man, whose despair at finding herself trapped by conventions and allotted roles should cause her to choose death over life, should also be seen, to my mind, as an interesting, albeit indirect, intervention by Brian Friel in an Irish society whose gender roles have recently been strongly challenged and notably altered both by changes in laws and attitudes towards sexual behaviour and by the decline in the influence of the Catholic church on private morality.

Yet, what is also at stake in this adaptation is the way in which Friel balances his respect for the original with an act of appropriation which Fintan O'Toole has rightly called "a bold reimagining of the classic Ibsen play" ("Friel does more than simply translate..." 6). Among the various alterations and departures from the original, I will deliberately focus on those that establish direct or indirect references to earlier Friel works. In what O'Toole calls an elegant in-joke, the dancer/prostitute of the play, a Mademoiselle Diana, becomes Mademoiselle Circe, an obvious echo of Joyce; more tellingly she is also given an (unlikely) story and a Frielian precedent: Judge Brack recalls that Mademoiselle Circe's "real name" is Mary Bridget O'Donnell, and that she was at some point up in court on a surprising and perhaps *risquée* charge of cruelty to animals. This makes no sense at all until one recalls that in *Faith Healer*, Teddy was the agent of one Mary Brigid O'Donnell also known as Miss Mulatto, whose act involved a hundred

and twenty pigeons she allegedly could speak to and understand, an act that came to an abrupt and tragic end when the birds all died of "galloping shingles". Further echoes of *Faith Healer* can be found both thematically, with the contrast between the man and the artist, the harrowing doubts as to one's power to create (Loeborg), and even linguistically, with the phrase "And it began with amity and protestations of affection" (HG 75), an echo of the final fateful night Frank met or rather embraced his death in *Faith Healer*. When Thea recalls Loeborg's cornflower blue eyes, one may think of *Molly Sweeney's* profusion of flowers. As for Juliana's "But we must rise above" (HG 86), it is taken straight from *The Home Place* and was a phrase often used by Friel's mentor, Tyrone Guthrie. George Tesman may well bring to mind the Casimir of *Aristocrats*. In the original play, Hedda toys with the idea of pushing Tesman into politics as a way of fighting boredom and acquiring status, but Friel's Judge Brack teases Hedda about possible hobbies that would keep her entertained and Hedda suggests bee-keeping, which applies with equal relevance to both Chekhov and Friel himself, a keen bee-keeper by all accounts. The extended title of Tesman's research project, "Domestic craft and husbandry as practised in Holland and parts of Belgium in the tenth century", calls to mind Hugh's book in *Translations*, Tim's thesis in *The Communication Cord* as well of Frank's work in *Wonderful Tennessee*, while Judge Brack's affected use of both French ("Enchanté", "Au revoir", "à deux", "soupçon of salacious gossip") and American phrases ("Gee whiz", "hunky dory") smacks of a linguistic self-awareness typical of many Friel characters. Certain cadences, a ternary rhythm and the recurrent use of that very Frielian device, the question tag, also conspire to create a music familiar to the Friel specialist.

In the final analysis, *Hedda Gabler* provides Brian Friel with an opportunity to give his own version of a key text of the modern theatre that has, in some ways, become a little outdated. In his appropriation of Ibsen's text, Friel clarifies and expands, without simplifying the complexity of the central characters. This is done through a range of

structural and linguistic strategies identifiable in his earlier Russian adaptations. Friel's interest in the play seems to rest on the psychological explorations of individuals interacting within a social environment that limits the roles and options available to them, especially in terms of the gender politics at work. When Hedda realises what options she has left, she commits suicide in what amounts to the ultimate refusal "to be coerced", whether by Tesman, by Brack, by scandal, by her own fear of transgression or by motherhood. But Friel is also revisiting a number of themes close to his heart and offering his faithful readers allusions to and echoes of his own work. Fintan O'Toole is quite right to suggest that this adaptation is more a "variation on" Ibsen, since Friel takes liberties with the original and self-consciously weaves into the pattern of the play his own recognizable motifs. Without being comparable in depth and longevity to the relationship he has developed artistically and emotionally with Chekhov, Brian Friel's first foray into Ibsenite territory shows an ability to establish "a form of privileged conversation" through adaptation, and adds yet another very strong play to the most impressive body of work he has given Irish and world theatre over the past fifty years.

Notes

1. Subsequent references parenthetically as "*HC*".
2. Ballybeg, from the Irish *Baile Beag*, means small town.
3. *The Saucer of Larks*. New York: Doubleday; London: Victor Gollancz, 1962 and *The Gold in the Sea*. New York: Doubleday; London: Victor Gollancz, 1966.
4. See Friel's own account of the visit in the BBC Northern Ireland radio piece from August 1965 "An Observer in Minneapolis" in Delaney, 35-39.
5. The company has published pamphlets, *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* and more recently a series of critical studies as well as the new *Field Day Review*.
6. For more information on Field Day see Richtarik and Pelletier.

7. *Three Sisters* was one of the two plays Friel saw Guthrie direct there, the other being *Hamlet*.
8. Besides *Three Sisters*, Friel also adapted, albeit in the same language, a little known piece by the eighteenth-century Irish actor and dramatist Charles Macklin, under the title *The London Vertigo*.
9. "You know Ibsen is my favourite writer". Letter to A. L. Vishnevski, 7 November 1903.
10. For a thorough and inspiring exploration of Hedda from an actress's point of view, see Suzman, 83-104.

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