

UNIVERSAL OR PROVINCIAL? : EARLY RECEPTION OF BRIAN FRIEL'S *PHILADELPHIA, HERE I COME!*

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Abstract:

This article, part of a larger research work that resulted in a Professorship Thesis, presents a survey and evaluation of the early reception of one of Brian Friel's first plays: *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964). The article also explores the question of emigration from Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s, considering British legislation on the matter, and comments on the eventual influence such issue, among other factors, may have had on criticism about the performance of the play at the time.

Keywords: Irish theatre, Brian Friel, *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, emigration, reception, Britain.

A significant number of Brian Friel's plays have been situated in the fictional town of Baile Beag, in the county of Donegal. In his Introduction to Friel's *Selected Plays*, Seamus Deane explained that the characteristics of this fictional setting are a fusion of the two environments in which Friel grew up, "the socially depressed and politically dislocated world of Derry and the haunting attraction of the lonely landscapes and traditional mores of rural Donegal" (12).

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The name, anglicised as Ballybeg, means “small town” in Irish, and bears two connotations. On the one hand, just like the title of the play *Our Town* (1938), by the American dramatist Thornton Wilder (1897-1975), the name represents a generalisation, the notion that this town could be each and every small town in Ireland. At the same time, the emphasis on the size suggests an insularity, a provincial mentality, conservative and maybe also backward, an aspect extensively exploited in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* the first of Friel’s plays to be set in Baile Beag.¹

However it is not the creation of this authentic, naturalistic setting that would lead Richard Pine to make the claim that “contemporary Irish drama begins in 1964 in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, with Gareth O’Donnell’s bewilderment: ‘I don’t know. I – I – I don’t know’” (1). Pine argues that Brian Friel’s real innovation in *Philadelphia* was the device he created to dramatise the conflict within his central character as he faced the imminence of his emigration to America, leaving behind him the routine and predictability of life with his uncommunicative father in Baile Beag. By using two actors to portray the inner and outer personae of the twenty-five-year-old man, Private Gar and Public Gar, Friel is enabled to reveal the torment of a character who is isolated between a rejected past and an imagined future.² In his initial stage directions Friel explains the device in the following terms:

The two Gars, PUBLIC GAR and PRIVATE GAR, are two views of the one man. PUBLIC GAR is the Gar that people see, talk to, talk about. PRIVATE GAR is the unseen man, the man within, the conscience, the *alter ego*, the secret thoughts, the id. PRIVATE GAR, the spirit, is invisible to everybody, always. Nobody except PUBLIC GAR hears him talk. But even PUBLIC GAR, although he talks to PRIVATE GAR occasionally, never sees him and *never looks at him*. One cannot look at one’s *alter ego*. (*Philadelphia* 27)

The significance of this innovation has become clearer with the passing of the years – as American film director Billy Wilder once said, “Hindsight is always twenty-twenty.” One of the best evaluations of

the importance of this moment in the history of Irish theatre is provided by Christopher Murray:

What was revolutionary about *Philadelphia* in 1964 was that, while using traditional materials such as a peasant setting and décor, with familiar characters such as a parish priest and a schoolmaster, it dispensed with plot and concentrated on situation or condition. The condition explored is alienation. In Gar O'Donnell Friel supplied an Irish Hamlet for his time, a character longing for contact but driven back repeatedly on himself since the world he inhabits is no longer the stable world of authority and security it once was[...]. Gar hopes to recover love by exiling himself and finding a surrogate family in Philadelphia, but it is clear from Private's comments (and theme song) that this is an illusion. Even Public does not really believe in exile: the last line of the play tells us he does not know why he is going. Uncertainty and agnosticism define Gar as the new anti-hero in Irish drama. (169)

In his *History of Irish Theatre 1601-2000* Chris Morash went further still and argued that Friel's innovation represented a challenge to "one of the central assumptions of naturalistic theatre and the whole empiricist worldview that supports it" (224). How possible was it, however, for the first-night critics to discern the importance of what they were seeing when the play reached London in 1967?

The first production of the play was directed by Hilton Edwards (co-founder, together with Micheal MacLiammoir, of the Dublin Gate Theatre in 1928), at Dublin's Gaiety Theatre, as part of the Dublin International Theatre Festival of 1964. Edwards was quoted as declaring that he found the play "intensely human, full of humour, well written and intensely normal, a play on a situation that could take place in any Irish country town" (*Irish Press* 1964). The same article reported that the London impresario Oscar Lowenstein had already bought the play

"sight unseen" for the West End. One month later and a week into the festival, it was reported that the play had "so impressed B.B.C. scouts in script form that it has already been bought for a radio adaptation" and was being tipped as the highlight of an otherwise lacklustre festival (*Daily Mail* 1964). Desmond Rush enthusiastically and unequivocally declared that it was "far and away the finest new Irish play of this Dublin Theatre Festival and of this year," going on to state that "it firmly establishes Mr. Friel in the front line of our contemporary writers for the theatre" (*Irish Independent* 1964).

Emigration lies at the heart of *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*. By focusing on the emotional turmoil endured by Gareth O'Donnell on the eve of his departure for the United States, Brian Friel dramatises the situation faced by hundreds of thousands of Irish people in the post-War period alone. In fact, as both Friel and the play's director Hilton Edwards attempted, in vain, to convince the press prior to the play's New York première in 1966, the play examines a universal drama, not merely an Irish one. One Irish American reviewer, Pete Hamill, accepted the argument, telling readers of the *New York Post* that *Philadelphia* was not an 'Irish play': "It is true that the play is set in Ireland, that it concerns the inner and outer life of a young Irishman bound for America. [...] But it is no more an Irish play than 'The Cherry Orchard' is a Russian play" (*New York Post*). In a similar vein Brian Friel was quoted as saying that, "an individual leaving behind him a whole culture is a universal theme" (LaPole). Since the British critics were no more inclined to view the play as being 'universal' in 1967 than their American colleagues had been the previous year it is important to try and comprehend the issue of Irish emigration as the English would have seen it at the time.

Although the play deals with the case of an Irishman about to take a plane for America the figure of the Irish immigrant was very familiar in southern England in the 1950s and 1960s. In my own personal recollection, living in St. Albans, 20 miles north of London, I remember two Irish tradesmen, Mr. McCormick, the carpenter, and Mr. O'Connor,

the decorator, who worked in our house on numerous occasions before each of them emigrated a second time, to Australia. The 1950s had seen a particularly high influx of Irish immigrants into the UK. At the beginning of the decade the 1951 British census registered the presence of 537,709 people who had been born in the Irish Republic (Ferriter 473); by 1961 that number had swelled to 780,000, and the Irish were "the largest immigrant racial group in the greater London area, with other significant Irish populations in Coventry and Birmingham" (Ferriter 475). In the 1960s, as a direct result of the efficacy of the Irish Government's Programme for Economic Expansion, introduced in 1958, there was a marked decline in the overall rate of Irish emigration: "The average annual emigration rate (per 1,000 of the population), which had been about 14 between 1951 and 1961, dropped to less than 5 between 1961 and 1971. While 44,427 emigrated in 1961, only 12,226 did so in 1963" (Ferriter 542). *Philadelphia* had its première in Dublin on 28 September 1964, and Friel states that the play is set in "the present." Indeed, Aer Lingus had only introduced transatlantic flights in 1958, so the play's plot is very clearly rooted in a contemporary reality. Gar O'Donnell may have been an individual in a sharply reduced exodus, but he was nonetheless a representative of a demographic phenomenon that was only too familiar to London critics and theatre audiences in 1967.

The immigration question had in fact been high on the British political agenda since 1958, when the district of Notting Hill in London had been the scene of serious racially motivated violence. In *The Hostage* one of the most topical (and controversial) of the play's contemporary references comes at the very end of Act Two, when the Soldier sings:

SOLDIER.

I love my dear old Notting Hill, wherever I may roam,
But I wish the Irish and the niggers and the wogs,
Were kicked out and sent back home. (Behan 206)

On 9 September 1958, just five weeks before the première of Behan's play, Notting Hill, an area of high immigrant population, especially of West Indians, was invaded by a mob of hundreds of white men chanting 'Niggers Out', smashing windows and attacking black residents (Marr 198-9). One of the immediate results of the riot, itself the consequence of tension that had been building ever since the *Empire Windrush* had docked at Tilbury on 23 June 1948 bearing 492 men from Jamaica and Trinidad, was the creation of the Notting Hill Carnival at the end of August the following year, as a celebration of black culture. On the political level, the result was the passing of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act in 1962, which restricted immigration to 40,000 legal immigrants and their dependents per year.

One of the many controversial aspects of this legislation was the fact that the Republic of Ireland was excluded from the new restrictions, being granted an open border with the UK. As Andrew Marr states:

This may have seemed only practical politics given the huge number of Irish people living and working [in Britain] already but it offended in two ways. By discriminating in favour of a country which had been neutral in the war with Hitler and declared itself a republic, but against Commonwealth countries which had stood with Britain, it infuriated many British patriots. Second, by giving Irish people a better deal than Indians or West Indians it seemed frankly racist. (200)

Thus, paradoxically, legislation which was designed to offer Irish immigrants a privileged status in relation to those from Commonwealth countries was instrumental in increasing the level of prejudice against them from some sectors of the population. It is recorded that, in the post-War decades, "far from being warmly received, as in Scotland, Irish migrants in England were the targets of much antagonism and violence" (Ramdin 40). This violence was dramatised most notably by

the playwright David Rudkin in *Afore Night Come* (1960). Tom Murphy has also examined violence within the Irish immigrant community itself, in *A Whistle in the Dark* (1961), a play set in the home of an Irish immigrant family living in Coventry.³ The ambivalence of the English attitude to Irish immigrants is well-illustrated by the English Soldier in *The Hostage*, who responds to Teresa's justification for the actions of his Irish counterpart being held in Belfast: "It's because of the English being in Ireland that he fought," with more tolerance than he shows in his notorious song, quoted above:

SOLDIER.

And what about the Irish in London? Thousands of them. Nobody's doing anything to them. We just let them drink their way through it. That's London for you. (Behan 186)

Ranging from tolerance to open prejudice the English attitude to the Irish immigrant was thus markedly ambivalent. One might reasonably expect, therefore, that critical reaction in 1967 to Brian Friel's play about the complex emotional state of the emigrant, albeit one about to fly to America rather than Britain, would be coloured by shades of this spectrum.

In 1967, in fact, the subject of immigration was rarely off the front pages of the British newspapers as the plight of the Kenyan Asians unfolded. Kenya had gained its independence from Britain under Jomo Kenyatta in 1963, at which time there was a population of some 185,000 people of Asian descent living in the country. The Colonial Secretary of the Conservative Government at that time, Duncan Sandys, guaranteed their absolute right of entry to Britain should they wish to leave Africa, confident that, at that time, most of them were happy where they were. However the Kikuyu native majority of Kenya, resentful of the higher economic and professional status of the Asians, subjected them to racially motivated attacks reminiscent of those suffered by German Jews under the Nazis in 1930s Germany. Finally Kenyatta offered the Asians a choice

between surrendering their British passports and taking Kenyan citizenship, or of being reduced to the status of foreigners on temporary work permits. Not surprisingly the Kenyan Asians preferred to exercise their right to live and work in Britain. In the words of Andrew Marr:

Through 1967 they were coming in by plane at the rate of about a thousand a month. The newspapers began to put the influx onto the front pages and the now-popular television news showed great queues waiting for British passports and flights. Enoch Powell, in an early warning shot, said that half a million East African Asians could eventually enter which was 'quite monstrous. He called for an end to work permits and a complete ban on dependents coming to Britain. (Marr 302)

Duncan Sandys, the very man who, as a Government minister, had uttered the promise of safe haven to the Kenyan Asians, now led calls from the Opposition front bench to close the door against them. In February 1968 the Labour Prime Minister, James Callaghan, ceded to mounting popular pressure and, the following month, the Commonwealth Immigrants Act was rushed through Parliament, introducing the requirement that prospective immigrants should demonstrate a "close connection" with the UK before being allowed into the country.

Interestingly, the only critic who situated *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* directly against this context of mounting racial tension identified herself as "an Irish viewer" in each of the two reviews she wrote of the play. Writing for two very different monthly publications: the young socialites' glossy, *Queen*, and the British theatre record, *Plays and Players*, she was obviously able to provide a more considered analysis than the overnight reviewers had been able to do. In fact, to be precise, Mary Holland (1935-2004) was British, having been born in Dover. However, both her parents were of Irish extraction and, at the age of six, she had been sent to a convent boarding school in Cork, where one of

her parents' relatives was a nun. Her secondary education was at another convent boarding school, this time in Hampshire in England. She was thus well-equipped to understand both sides of Anglo-Irish relations.⁴

Mary Holland's review in *Queen* went straight to the heart of the matter

A few weeks ago I was talking to a Tory lady politician about immigration. Or rather I was listening.⁵ After she had said a few things about Duncan being right, though perhaps a bit tactless, and that of course the best thing would be to ship them home where they belonged, I asked her, the brogue breaking in my voice, what she thought ought to be done about the Irish here. She leapt on the question: 'But the Irish go home; that's the marvellous thing about them, most of them don't stay!' (*Queen*)

She goes on to confess that she kept thinking of the Tory lady politician whilst she was watching the play, reflecting on the differences between her own perspective on the play, as an Irishwoman, and that of the majority of the English audience:

Of course, it's impossible for an Irish viewer like myself to be objective about a play like this. I found it funny, clear-eyed, compassionate and almost unbearably true to life. But I suspect that a lot of people in the audience thought it sentimental, overworking the commonplace Irishisms they've been hearing for years in everything from Shaw to the light tenor voices in urban pubs, maudlin on Guinness and keening about the exile's farewell to Innisfree. (*Queen*)

She explains, for the benefit of her well-heeled young English readers, how these differing points of view had arisen and, of direct relevance to any analysis of *Philadelphia*, the impact of geography upon the

emotional stress of emigrating to America as opposed to simply taking a ferry across the Irish Sea to Fishguard:

One of the troubles about Ireland is that it has been with us too long and what used to be statements of fact about how life is have degenerated into sodden clichés. Another is that it is too close. It is true, as the Tory lady said to me, that the Irish can go home from Liverpool and Birmingham and it is perhaps hard for an English audience to appreciate that emigration to America has always seemed quite different, a final cutting away of the roots[...] . Maybe this play would have seemed more real, more painful, more relevant to our present troubles if it had been about, say, a Pakistani or a West Indian on the night before he left for England. (*Queen*)

The review concludes with an endorsement of the unanimous praise that had been heaped upon Hilton Edwards for his direction of the play and upon Patrick Bedford and Donal Donnelly for the assured synchronisation that they brought to the characters of Public Gar and Private Gar. Along with four other members of the cast (Maureen O'Sullivan as Madge; Éamonn Kelly as S.B. O'Donnell; Dominic Roche as Master Boyle; and Alex McDonald as Canon Mick O'Byrne) these actors had created the principal roles at the play's première in Dublin in September 1964 and had then taken the play to New York and on tour through the US, in addition to English regional venues, before finally reaching the 900-seat Lyric on Shaftesbury Avenue. Their ensemble playing must indeed have been a remarkable delight to watch. In Mary Holland's words: "They play with impeccable timing and huge confidence. So they should. They have been acquiring it from audiences the length and breadth of America before they came here" (*Queen*). Giving evidence of the brilliant style for which she was to become known, Mary Holland closes the text with a pithy punch-line that encapsulates the content of the review and remits to the concept

introduced in the opening paragraph: "Emigrant relations of my own caught the first night in Louisiana."

There is no record of any reader feedback to Mary Holland's provocative challenge to her young English Tory readers. In any case the magazine was sold to its rival publication a couple of months later, and Mary Holland was soon to be caught up in the early rumblings of the Troubles as Northern Ireland correspondent for the *Observer*, so there was little chance for further dialogue between writer and readership. Nonetheless, with her review for *Plays and Players* the following month, Holland had the opportunity to develop her theme of the differences between Irish and English reactions to the play, this time referring not to the audience as a whole but to a representative member of it:

I found the scenes within the family, with village friends and ancient foes almost unbearably true to life [...]. My English companion, on the other hand, found it rather overladen with the clichés of the Irish Emigrant's Farewell,⁶ which God knows have been worked into the ground in maudlin tenor song and story. Sitting in the plushy stalls of a plush Shaftesbury Avenue theatre, surrounded by a plushy English audience I felt rather defensive about it myself. Every emotional string jerked – the harsh father, the dancing, wild-eyed, dead mother, the lads boasting about sad, imagined sexual feats, the drunken, anti-clerical schoolteacher and complacently rosy parish priest. After a while I began to feel as though I was watching my own family on *Man Alive*, anxious that a lot of curious voyeurs were enjoying an orgy of essentially private sentimentality and pain. (*Plays and Players* 21)

It is a significant feature of her review, which is entitled "Escape From the Family Rosary", that her own experience of Irish life as a child leads her to contest the claims made by Hilton Edwards and Brian Friel

for the play's universality. Whereas Edwards had invoked Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* as a play whose universality transcended its Russian setting, and argued that *Philadelphia* could be considered equally universal, Mary Holland opens her review by saying that this analogy would be valid for Friel's collection of short stories *The Gold in the Sea*, but not for this play. She goes on to argue that:

[...] Mr Friel has indulged his every emotion, has failed in the restraint necessary to art, and because of this his play fails by the highest Chekhovian standards to transcend local experience, one known in a lot of countries but parochial none the less. It is a story of a boy leaving a peasant home for a distant alien country, where it might have been about any young man tied by all kinds of emotions from which he must cut free. (*Plays and Players* 21)

Thus we have the position of an Irish critic based in London, who feels that *Philadelphia* is so very authentically Irish that it is too near to the bone for an Irishman or Irishwoman to be able to watch it comfortably.

In specifically theatrical terms, a major factor in the reception of Friel's new play is that, when the London critics attended the opening night of *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* at the Lyric Theatre in September 1967, none of them could have been unaware of the play's successful record over the previous three years, which had been widely reported in the British press. Some of the critics may indeed have already seen the play at its Dublin première on 28 September 1964. On the whole, however, London premières were handled by senior critics while their junior assistants were sent off to review productions outside the metropolis. In the case of the *Daily Telegraph*, for example, the young film critic Eric Shorter was sent off to Dublin, while three years later *Philadelphia* was reviewed by the grand old man W. A. Darlington (1890-1979), nearing the end of his 48-year tenure as theatre critic on the paper from 1920 to 1968. In his assessment of the Dublin première

of *Philadelphia*, Eric Shorter linked Friel's play with the success-story of the first week of the Festival, Eugene McCabe's *King of the Castle*, as evidence that, although it was too early to talk about "a renaissance in Irish drama," the Festival was undoubtedly achieving its "aim of discovering native talent" (*Daily Telegraph*). Shorter noted that the play dealt with the "familiar and vexatious Irish question: why young men leave home," going on to state that, "after sex, religion and politics, no theme comes closer to the Irish heart; and Mr. Friel treats it with charm, simplicity and fearless sentiment, as if he were writing from first-hand experience."⁷

That weekend the *Sunday Times* wrote that it was "immensely desirable that the play should be seen in London," and also referred to its authenticity: "The best drama is always rooted in the soil from which it springs; and *Philadelphia, Here I Come* is all Ireland" (*Sunday Times*, 1964). The review published in the *Times* earlier in the week, under the headline "An Emigrant's Tale," had suggested, indeed, that the play was perhaps *too* Irish, and that it lacked the "universal quality" of another Festival entry that year, John B. Keane's *The Year of the Hiker*:

Mr. John Keane, the other Festival dramatist who writes about Irish rural life, creates characters that could translate to Minnesota or Malmö. Mr Friel lacks this universal quality and therefore his play may have more significance for local audiences than elsewhere. (*Times*, 1964: 15)

For the *Times* critic, Friel's play showed "the approach of the novelist rather than the dramatist." Peter Lennon, writing in the *Guardian*, sounded a note of relief, that five minutes into the play, "it was clear that here at last was an authentic voice," arguing that Friel's accuracy was based upon minute observation "of the inarticulate father; of the Americanised childless aunt; of coarse youth in Ireland; of the blankness that invades the mind of a young Irish married woman when faced with the possibility of being still in love with another man" (*Guardian*,

1964). The following week Lennon published an interview with Friel in which he addressed the question of the play's Irishness and the difficulty this had presented for the director:

Hilton Edwards the producer is an Englishman. He did a very fine job but there were some things he found hard to grasp. For example the man travelling around with the Irish couple from America.

What relationship had this man with the woman, he wanted to know – or even with the husband? But there was no definite relationship. I think you find that a lot in Irish marriages, there is another man floating like a satellite around the couple. A person in whom the wife confides, probably. There is nothing sinister in this and certainly nothing sexual, but English people would find that very hard to grasp. And people want to know whether Gareth's old girl friend who comes to say good-bye is still in love with him even though she is now married and a mother.

But in Ireland many people would never admit such a possibility. They pull down the blinds. The Irish mind has many windows and the blinds are often down. In England they might have made love and it would have been tragic – or worse they might have made love and it would have made no difference. But not in Ireland. (Friel 1964)

On the same day, a review published in *Stage* detected something of the far-reaching significance in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, suggesting that the play marked "a turning point in Irish theatre, for it raised the standard of plays to the international class" (*Stage* 1964). This confidence was shared by the London theatre periodicals. In his overview of the Festival, Harold Matthews wrote that the play was foremost among the world premières staged in Dublin which "fully merit the presumption that they will be presented again" (Matthews 4-12). In *Plays and Players*,

Gerald Colgan saluted "the emergence of a major talent in the theatre" and argued that, while there was no great innovation in the play's plot nor in its device of having two actors to portray the public and private faces of the central character, "what *is* new is the freshness of the writing, the study in depth of conventional, undramatic people, and the sensitive analysis of the melancholy repression which lies at the root of the Irish personality, often manifesting itself in Walter Mitty-like escapism and bravado" (Colgan).

Following this auspicious start the play's next outing was as a radio drama on the B.B.C. Third Programme, on 25 February 1965, returning to the Dublin theatre in August that year on the smaller stage of the Gate. Hilton Edwards was quoted as affirming that, "of the 330 plays that I have directed since Micheal MacLiammoir and I started the Gate Theatre 37 years ago, Brian Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* is the most moving and entertaining, and certainly the most successful Irish play since *Tolka Row*" (*Stage* 1965). The production's transfer to the United States was confirmed in December by the *Irish Times*, which informed its readers that the play would be seen first of all in Philadelphia ("of all places!"), in January 1966, before opening on Broadway in February:

The 'Angel' responsible is David Merrick, who missed the first production of the show, but caught it on its revival at the Gate Theatre here last August. Everybody who has seen the play will be confident that Mr. Merrick is on to a good thing, not only artistically, but commercially, with all those nostalgic Irish-Americans to draw on. (*Irish Times* 1965)

The play opened on 17 January 1966 in Philadelphia and reached New York via Boston, its American première being mirrored in Ireland by Radio Eireann's broadcast of the play, with Eamonn Keane playing both Gareth O'Donnell's Public and Private selves.

Although the London papers reported the unexpected cancellation of the final preview performance of the play on Broadway, allegedly

due to a dispute between David Merrick and the *New York Times* critic Stanley Kauffman,⁸ the American production went on to fulfil the *Irish Times* prediction of artistic and commercial success. By August 1966 the production was entering the record books as the second Irish play to achieve a run of 200 performances on Broadway. According to Dublin's *Sunday Independent*, the first was Paul Vincent Carroll's *Shadow and Substance*, which went on to reach 275 performances in 1938. However, the paper reported that *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* was expected to break that record in October that year, by which time David Merrick planned to have Friel's follow-up, *The Loves of Cass McGuire*, in New York too: "It will probably be the first time that an Irish dramatist had two of his plays going simultaneously on Broadway." (*Sunday Independent* 1966) The milestone performance was duly reported when it arrived. The *Irish Press* noted that Friel's play had "passed out such plays as *The Playboy of the Western World* by Synge, and *Within the Gates*, by O'Casey, which ran for 141 performances on Broadway" (*Irish Press* 1966). The record-breaking run was brought to a close at the end of November, and the production then embarked on a tour of cities in America and Canada, which extended into June of the following year.

In early August 1967, with the cast of Hilton Edwards's production back in Ireland, the London papers were finally able to announce details of the forthcoming tour of British theatres, prior to a West End opening, with performances due to open at Brighton on 21 August, Golders Green a week later, and Oxford on 4 September, followed by a week in Manchester. As the production made its way towards London there was some sense of the unconventional route that the play had taken from Dublin to the West End. Reviewing the Manchester first night for the *Guardian* Robert Waterhouse remarked that the production now faced "its most testing period," and suggested that, "unlike most pre-London shows, the question was whether the production was stale". When the play finally opened at the Lyric Theatre on 20 September the London critics found no evidence of weariness in the Irish actors after

their three-year marathon. The first-night reviews were almost unanimous in according a hearty welcome to Brian Friel's fourth play.

Writing under the headline "Fully deserving of its reputation", the *Times* critic, Irving Wardle, began his review by stating that *Philadelphia* was a "tender and honest play" and acknowledging that the praise heaped upon the production in Dublin and New York was richly deserved. Describing the play as "a study in the classic Irish theme of delayed manhood" he situated the play in a tradition stretching back to Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island* and Patrick Kavanagh's long poem *The Great Hunger*.⁹ He felt that Friel's writing lacked the "corrosive analysis and tragic poetry" of his predecessors, but that nonetheless the play "embodies the situation in a group of very real people whose voices carry resonantly from Donegal." But Wardle's greatest praise was reserved for Friel's innovative device of dividing the representation of Gar between two actors: "It is always exciting to see a writer discovering a way of translating an "undramatic" situation into drama; and Mr. Friel has adopted the simple, but psychologically accurate, device of splitting his hero into a public and private personality (played by two actors)." (8) Irving Wardle's praise for Friel's technical innovation was echoed by W. A. Darlington, his veteran counterpart at the *Daily Telegraph*, whose review was headed "Two actors play one dual character." Darlington argued that Friel's idea was more than "an ingenious stage trick," since he made it "serve as a device for a real examination of the young man's character – at times touching and human, at other times very funny" (*Daily Telegraph*). Like Wardle he extended high praise to Patrick Bedford and Donnelly for the precision with which they executed their synchronised movements, however he suggested that the remainder of the Irish cast acted "very pleasantly, though not too audibly." Since he was the only critic to make this particular criticism one might reasonably wonder whether, at seventy-seven years old, Mr. Darlington was not becoming perhaps a little hard of hearing.

In the *Guardian*, Philip Hope-Wallace also referred to the play's track record, in his case mentioning the favourable review that his own paper had published of one of *Philadelphia's* Dublin runs. (It is not clear whether he is referring to the play's première at the Dublin Festival in 1964 or its return in 1965, since he refers, erroneously to Dublin performances "last year", when it had actually been in North America.) However, he tempers that reference by describing the play as "pleasant though protracted." In his opinion, the device of splitting Gar into his public and private selves was little more than a gimmick, which was entertaining enough in the first act, but which became "slightly tiresome at times", reminiscent of "one of those 'invisible' music hall turns where the character says one thing in his public persona ('yes, I will indeed, sir') while the other half speaks the unutterable inner thought ('you bloody old hypocrite')" (*Guardian*). Hope-Wallace confessed that, as the novelty wore off, he found himself wondering "whether this act of emigration is really worth so much heart-searching, if the young man is quite interesting enough to warrant such ruffling of memories and feelings." In fact, the *ennui* displayed by Philip Hope-Wallace here may reflect as much on himself, such is the subjectivity of the critic's craft, as upon Friel's play. At the time of this review Hope-Wallace (1911-1979) had been theatre critic on the *Guardian* (formerly the *Manchester Guardian*) since 1946. In 1971 he handed over to the present incumbent, Michael Billington, then just thirty-two years old, in order to concentrate on opera criticism. Irving Wardle wrote that, towards the end of his career Hope-Wallace became so jaded by over-exposure to the theatre that, unlike his colleagues, he could easily improvise his reviews over the phone immediately after performances:

[...] the late Philip Hope-Wallace, who was clearly to be heard dictating his instant reactions through the flimsy walls of the Chichester Festival offices where his colleagues sat paralysed over their opening sentences. But by that time, Hope-Wallace

was bored with the theatre, and could romp home on automatic pilot. (1992, 127)

Another critic who professed herself, if not bored, certainly irritated with Friel's play was Penelope Mortimer (1918-1999), who, notwithstanding her own Welsh roots, attacked the play with a series of stereotypes that came close to racial prejudice. Her review began as follows:

The luck of the Irish held out last night at the Lyric Theatre by a Blarney's breadth. *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* Brian Friel's play about an Irish Catholic would-be émigré to Philadelphia, a rather woebegone offering from the Dublin Theatre Festival, slogged about the stage with the air of a leprechaun who is very far from home. (*Evening Standard*)

She went on to dismiss the action of the play, "such as it is," mentioning the scene when Gar's friends come to say farewell to him, referring to them as "the boys – or should it be bhoys," but reserved her greatest scorn for the world of Ballybeg itself. Conceding that the play had been "a tremendous success on Broadway," she went on to criticise both the Irish and, implicitly, the American theatregoers who had patronised the play, by saying that the play "undoubtedly states a great many truths about primitive, superstitious people who believe, or half-believe that the streets of Philadelphia are paved with gold." She understood Gar's desire to leave such a place by suggesting that his "future in Ballybeg is as hopeless as a lump of damp peat." At the end of the review she admitted that she had adopted her negative attitude to the play at the very beginning, in fact, precisely at the introduction of the character of Private Gar: "At the beginning of the play Gareth states forebodingly: 'It's all over – and it's all about to begin.' I can only say that at this point it was indeed all about to begin; but that it was also, for me, already over." Such a resolutely negative attitude can possibly be

understood in relation to the persona of Penelope Mortimer herself. Born into the family of a vicar in the North Wales seaside town of Rhyl she had grown up to become a novelist whose principal milieu was that of the angst of British upper middle class married woman. At that time she herself was married to barrister, novelist and playwright John Mortimer, and the couple were frequently photographed participants on the London social scene of the 1950s and 1960s. Known for her readiness to utter public opinions on all subjects she also criticised novels for the *Sunday Times* and films for the *Observer*. One cannot help suspecting that, for such a dynamic metropolitan socialite, to have expressed enthusiasm for a play set in the rural backwater of Baile Beag would have been terribly infra dig, don't you know, *dahling*!

Happily, Penelope Mortimer's negative voice occupied but a small niche amongst the critics in the daily papers. Two days later, in the *Daily Mail*, Peter Lewis wrote that it was "a play of great charm." Unfortunately, either he or, more probably, his sub-editor gave his review the ambiguous headline, "Irish charm beats the boredom," which conveyed an impression that the play itself was boring, whereas his point was that it was life in Ballybeg which was boring. He argued that it was in fact the authentic "portrayal of just how dead life can be in rural Ireland" that prevented the play from being "stickily sentimental." Lewis also affirmed that, in its use of humour, it was an identifiably Irish play: "being Irish, it is funny as well as touching and sad" (*Daily Mail*).

In the Sunday papers, one of the most balanced reviews came from J. W. Lambert (1917-1985) in the *Sunday Times*. Although he referred to the play's central character as "a small-town Irish boy" this was the only mention he made of the play's nationality – unlike Penelope Mortimer. In a review that must certainly have pleased Hilton Edwards and Brian Friel he argued that the play was indeed universal in appeal, particularly so because of the successful ploy of showing the central character's two selves. Lambert described the play as "intelligent, humane, touching, comical and extremely well done,"

which comes as close as possible to the evaluation of later critics, with all the hindsight at their disposal.

In the weeklies, Jeremy Kingston in *Punch* commended the performance as being “one of those rare occasions when the creative work of author, director and performers mesh together to form a perfect whole”, and particularly commended Brian Friel for his use of the split-personality device, “that may not be new but is unfamiliar enough to seem fresh and charming.” Like other critics he felt that the play avoided the trap of falling into sentimentality: “Mr. Friel sustains the balance between comedy and pathos with such skill that the result is a powerful evocation of what it feels like to be dangling between two times” (*Punch*).

Two days later, however, the *Spectator* printed a remarkably offensive piece of anti-Irish propaganda, which can scarcely even be described as a review. The magazine is a mouthpiece for Conservative Party views and, indeed, its editorship is considered as a stepping stone to political office. In 1967 the editor was Nigel Lawson, who went on to rise to the position of Chancellor of the Exchequer in Margaret Thatcher’s government in 1983. But not even the right-wing views of the editor are sufficient to justify the vitriolic diatribe penned by the twenty-seven-year-old Hilary Spurling, theatre critic on the magazine from 1964 to 1970, from which this is a representative extract:

Here we have the Irish sitting in their bog and not so much gibbering as maundering about the blarney and the rainbows and the tay and the barefoot mountain lassies who die young. No wonder they die young if the alternative is to live with the suffocating self-importance of the daddies and the laddies. And if there is anything to equal the self-importance of the Irish – at any rate of this type of export Irishry – it is their bland garrulous and immoderately indulged self-satisfaction. Both are here presented in their purest form. (*Spectator* 375)

Referring to the play's "basic boredom" and "deplorable banality" Spurling went so far as to claim that Friel's "much admired 'theatrical' device of splitting our hero into two" was "a notion which could only have sprung from a blatant indifference to dramatic effect."

Fortunately for the commercial prospects of Brian Friel's play Hilary Spurling and Penelope Mortimer were very much minority voices. *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* went on to run for 53 performances at the Lyric Theatre, nowhere close to the record-breaking run the production had had on Broadway of 362 performances, but comparable at least to the revival of O'Casey's *The Shadow of a Gunman* at the Mermaid Theatre earlier in the year, which had run for 67 performances. In fact Brian Friel was up against some fairly stiff opposition in terms of premières from hitherto unknown dramatists. In a retrospective of the 1960s, Michael Billington, who had spent the decade as deputy drama critic of the *Times*, summarised 1967 as:

A sparkling year for débutant dramatists: Peter Nichols with *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*, Tom Stoppard with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, David Storey with *The Restoration of Arnold Middleton* and Alan Ayckbourn with *Relatively Speaking*. 'If any other European country had produced such a crop of new playwrights in twelve months', wrote Irving Wardle, 'it would be celebrating a theatrical renaissance.' (227)

Despite the remarkable commercial success of two of the above-mentioned plays (*Relatively Speaking* ran for 312 performances and *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg* for 148), the London stage that year was dominated, as always, by musicals. In particular, it was the year that *Fiddler on the Roof* began its marathon run of 2,030 performances (relatively humble by the standards of current musical giants like *Les Misérables* and *Phantom of the Opera*, each of which has now cleared the 9,000-performance mark). Of course, in historical terms, the most

important event of the decade in the British theatre was only to come the following year, the long-overdue demise of theatrical censorship and the Lord Chamberlain's archaic office. In its turn this cleared the way for the staging in 1968 of a very different musical, *Hair*, arguably the production that best represents the climate of counter-culture that is for many the most significant aspect of the close of the 60s.

As regards the Irish play on the London stage, the 1960s was not a particularly fertile decade. Apart from Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, only a few new plays made their appearance, including Beckett's *Happy Days* (1961) and *Play* (1963), Hugh Leonard's *The Au Pair Man* (1968), Tom Murphy's *A Whistle in the Dark* (1961) and *Famine* (1968), and O'Casey's *The Drums of Father Ned* (1960). According to Christopher Murray, the "second renaissance" enjoyed by Irish drama in the 1960s resulted in "a body of work for the Irish theatre unsurpassed since the early years of the century" (162). However, little of this work made its way immediately over to London. During the 1960s, Irish theatre was predominantly represented in London by means of revivals of the classics – Farquhar, Goldsmith, O'Casey, Shaw, Synge, Wilde, but above all Shaw. During the decade there were some thirty-three Shaw productions of one kind or another seen in London theatres. In fact, when *Philadelphia* came off at the Lyric it was immediately succeeded by Shaw's *Heartbreak House* on 9 November, which went on to run for 116 performances, more than double the number achieved by Friel's play. However, if London audiences gained little insight into what Murray describes as the "revolutionary period" being lived by the Irish theatre in the 1960s, the rapidly gathering pace of a very different kind of revolution in Northern Ireland in the final years of the decade meant that the theatrical representation of Ireland was set to undergo a radical change in the 1970s.

Brian Friel has gone on to establish himself as Ireland's leading dramatist. Plays like *Faith Healer*, *Translations* and *Dancing at Lughnasa* are all recognised as masterpieces. His prize-winning translation of *Three Sisters* (1981) and his adaptations *Uncle Vanya*

(1998), *The Yalta Game* (2001) and *The Bear* (2002) are testimony to his admiration for and affinity with the plays and stories of Anton Chekhov. In London's West End the most recent revival of a Friel play was Anna Mackmin's acclaimed production of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, which opened at the Old Vic on 5 March 2009 and ran for over two months. The production attracted much media attention as the acting début of the Corrs' lead singer Andrea in the role of Chris. However, although the play is set in Baile Beag in 1936, the London critics are no longer inclined to see the octogenarian Friel as a provincial playwright: of the 21 reviews reproduced in the pages of *Theatre Record*, over half describe the play as Chekhovian.

Notes

1. Friel's latest and possibly last play to use this setting is *The Home Place* (2005), which is set in the year 1878, immediately prior to Charles Stewart Parnell (1846-91) becoming the first President of the Land League. The play focuses specifically on the waning Protestant Ascendancy on the eve of the land agitation of 1879-82.
2. Six years previously Richard Pine and Richard Cave had recognized that Friel was actually developing an idea originally credited to Mary Manning (1905-1999) in her play *Youth's the Season*, first staged at the Gate Theatre in 1932 (83).
3. More recent perspectives on the situation of Irish immigrants in post-War Britain can be found in Jimmy Murphy's play *The Kings of the Kilburn High Road* (2001), first performed in 2000; Ulton Cowley's study *The Men Who Built Britain: A Celebration of the Irish Navvy* (2001); and Catherine Dunne's *An Unconsidered People: The Irish in London* (2003).
4. In fact, the following year, Mary Holland was sent to Northern Ireland as a correspondent for the *Observer*, where she reported on the rise of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association and, as John Hume recognized in his obituary, "she was the first journalist in Britain to give real coverage to the nature of our problems in Northern Ireland, and her work was a major factor in securing the attention they received at government and parliamentary level in Britain" (Hume).

In the later years of her career she worked for the *Irish Times*, where she became one of Ireland's most widely respected journalists.

5. From this clue one deduces that the unnamed politician must have been Margaret Thatcher, one of only 7 women who had been elected as Conservative MPs at the previous year's general election, on 31 March 1966 (*Women* 7).
6. The song mentioned, generally known as "The Emigrant's Farewell," is one of a number of traditional songs composed at the time of the mass emigration of approximately one and a half million people from Ireland to North America (and other destinations) in the decade that followed the Great Famine in 1845. The first verse is as follows: "Farewell to old Ireland the land of my childhood / That now and forever I am bound for to leave / Farewell to the shores where the shamrock is growing / It's the bright spot of beauty in the home of the brave / I will think on its valleys with fond admiration / Though never again its green hills will I see / For I'm bound for to cross o'er the wild swelling ocean / In search of fame fortune and sweet liberty."
7. Two days previously, in a brief note headed "Help Across the Border," the *Telegraph* had cast some doubt on Friel's Irish credentials. Reporting that the play had been written at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, with the aid of a £1,000 award from the Irish Arts Council, the paper stressed that Friel "lives in Derry and is technically a British subject" ("Help").
8. The extraordinary story behind this apparently innocuous event is told by John P. Harrington in his excellent account of the New York reception of the play (152-3).
9. To this play and poem I myself would add a prose work, James Joyce's *Dubliners*, for it seems to me that, in dramatising Gar's doubt, Brian Friel also builds doubt in the audience: will Gar indeed set off early in the morning to take his plane for Philadelphia, or will he, like Eveline, baulk at the last moment, perhaps even, like her, at the barrier itself. Public Gar's last line, the last line of the play, makes this a very real possibility – "I don't know. I – I – I don't know."

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