

A New Monograph on Brian Friel, Inspiring Giant of Irish Theatre

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Russell, Richard Rankin. *Modernity, Community, and Place in Brian Friel's Drama*. Second

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The book under scrutiny here is a massively revised and expanded second edition of the monograph *Modernity, Community, and Place in Brian Friel's Drama* (2014) by Richard Rankin Russell, under the same title. As he explains, he added “a series of new interchapters that augment and supplement the original study” (4). Among them of particular interest is the one about Friel’s shift to writing plays, in which the author claims that “[a] real reason Friel moved into drama exclusively is that he found it more amenable to experimentation” and this ritual-based genre is most appropriate to communicate the “ideal of community” (82, 85). Moreover, Russell also added a closing chapter with the joint analyses of three pieces from Friel’s later work, raising the number of plays which receive in-depth critical treatment in the book to eight. In chronological order, they are *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964), *The Freedom of the City* (1973), *Faith Healer* (1979), *Translations* (1980), *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), *Molly Sweeney* (1994), *The Home Place* (2005), and *Hedda Gabler (after Ibsen)* (2008); all qualifying as major works in the Friel canon. The research the author has accomplished for writing this monograph is awe-inspiring; any chapter convinces the reader that the scope of literary, philosophical, and cultural studies references used by Russell in his analyses is enormous and far-reaching.

The keywords announced in the title—“modernity,” “community,” and “place”—remain guiding concepts for the close reading of the selected plays. Although critical literature on Friel is embarrassingly abundant, about each of the eight plays Russell offers original insights concerning the representation of communities and the political or politically imbued economic powers under the guise of modernity, which might threaten or even destroy the former. Modernity and community prove to be inextricably intertwined in Friel, yet this does not mean, Russell contends, that Friel’s interest in rural culture would be nostalgic, and provides examples also of the playwright’s critique of that culture. Russell understands community as created by the playwright on the page as well as its re-creation through performance, happening “onstage and between actors and audiences” (17)—or in the imagination of the reader in case the staging takes place in the mind. His close readings underscore that the relations between community and modernity in

Friel are often manifest in a devastating clash leading to alienation but may also result in personal growth and a heightened form of spiritual experience. As the discussions reveal, these extremes and their variants are often set against each other in or across the plays, pinpointing their potentially contradictory effects on the human soul and its needs. For Russell, Gar in *Philadelphia* is a “particularly dislocated” man (51), who severs himself from the frustrating milieu of Ballybeg where communal life is already infected by the lure of modernity, trying to find a new identity in popular culture induced visions of a glamorous future in America only to be discouraged by the reality of his emigrant aunt’s stiflingly protective welcome. Russell has a keen eye for the sophisticated juxtaposition of details in Friel’s portrayal of the onslaught of modernity erasing certain communal values, for instance, he observes that the talk about the possible crash of the plane Gar will board is followed by Gar’s desperate attempts to recall a happy fishing trip with his father long ago, while the latter strives to remember another happy scene with his son (69–70).

Turning to *Freedom*, Russell takes the approach that the community formed of three very different people in Derry Guildhall, although fated, could model a communal potential and understanding between diverse sides in Northern Ireland as its basis is shared humanity. Also, he refers to Jacques Derrida’s theory of hauntology, which, he says, “enables us to acquire an epistemology of the dead” (128) and, reincarnating them from memory, “we have a communion with the dead, and we are given a responsibility to remember them into the future” (138). What crushes the mini-community in the Guildhall, Russell suggests, is not only the military or judicial weapons of the British authorities, but also the “negative form of modernity and tradition” represented by the Catholic Church and the nationalist balladeer’s distortions (100), which operate indirectly, one should not forget. Similarly, the community in *Translations* faces crisis not only due to the intervention of external forces but also to internal divisions as most of Ballybeg would hardly accept the possible inclusion of Yolland, let alone value his open, hybrid position as enriching for their rural society. Eventually, it is the old schoolmaster Hugh, Russell maintains, “who resolves that Irish culture must accommodate itself to certain aspects of modernity—particularly the speaking of English—to survive” (205).

In *Faith Healer*, Russell claims, the “themes of exile, homecoming and community are all intertwined” (142) more than in other works by Friel. Here the threesome of the protagonists traveling together become a spiritual community due to Frank Hardy’s renewed healing talent during their last night in a Ballybeg pub, as Russell illustrates it by references to meaningful gestures

and looks. Similarly to *Dancing at Lughnasa*, *Faith Healer* is a drama which testifies to ritual being an atavistic source of theater and theatricality, a belief Friel shared as it is known from his essays. The final sentences in Frank's closing monologue, Russell observes, depict him walking towards his certain death in a way that emphasizes the ritual nature of the scene foreboding his sacrifice at the hands of the farmers whom he sees as abstract figures. Nevertheless, Frank feels a kind of homecoming "precisely because he is experiencing *communitas*" (157) with the four men who are taking care of a fifth one in a wheelchair. True, the text signifies the need of victim and killers for each other, yet viewing it as a spiritual community of disparate characters which might carry hope "even for Northern Irish society" (173) sounds dubious and farfetched. The ending focuses on Frank's achieving inner peace while facing imminent death, and the text itself resists the forcing of political connotations on it. Not so with *Dancing at Lughnasa*, "the most emplaced of all Friel's dramas," (252) according to Russell, which, quite clearly, is grounded in the cultural and socio-political ambience of the 1930s, depicting "a society in transition" (251) towards modernization. At that time, pagan rituals were marginalized, even vilified, by the Catholic Church, a divisive power and morally rigorous ally of the new post-independence Irish state. Russell convincingly suggests that the five Mundy sisters' wild but separate movements in the central dance scene to the traditional tunes played by the new technological invention, the radio, prefigures the disruption of their female community in the process of modernization.

The guiding viewpoint of place proves less productive than those of community and modernity. Notably, Russell's statement in the "Introduction" that "the subject of place in drama, especially in non-American drama, is severely undertheorized" (2), does not acknowledge the existence of the book *Mapping Irish Theatre: Theories of Space and Place* (Cambridge UP, 2013) by Chris Morash and Shaun Richards, who make a precise distinction between place and space. Instead, Russell quotes the phenomenologist Edward S. Casey, for whom place is "a dynamic, ongoing event" (11), but the ways in which this idea and the awareness of Friel's stress on "flux" as the only demonstrable constant of life (15) have influenced this inquiry into the playwright's dramaturgy, do not always seem clear. The final chapter, "Home and Beyond: *Molly Sweeney*, *The Home Place*, and *Hedda Gabler (after Ibsen)*" makes up for this to an extent by a consistent examination of "home" in these late plays, introduced by the claim that "eviction and exile drive Friel's drama, but he instantiates temporary sites of sacredness over against that trajectory" (299), which chimes with the general human experience in our time. In *Molly Sweeney*,

after the trauma of losing her sight again and having to cope with isolation in hospital, Molly finds a new home in language and “a fantastic world,” a “theater of the mind,” populated with “imagined characters,” Russell concludes (304–05, 311). The protagonist of *The Home Place*, Christopher Gore’s painful experience is that his Anglo-Irish liminal, “stateless condition” (318) cannot be sustained in an Ireland of colonial divisions, even though he hopes to rise above those. In the last piece of the Frielian canon, the adaptation of *Hedda Gabler*, Hedda’s modernist individualism drives her towards spiritual placelessness, which Russell sees as paralleling Columba’s “similarly excessive and bellicose individualism in *The Enemy Within*” (329–30), Friel’s first self-acknowledged play, giving a frame to the oeuvre.

All in all, this monograph is unique in analyzing Friel’s drama around the joint themes of modernity, community, place, and their ramifications to pursue their nationally inflected interconnections across a selected group of masterpieces. In addition, several formal and stylistic aspects of the plays including the dramaturgical use of music, the body, language, memory, and issues of audience response are also discussed, supported by or arguing with various critical or theoretical views and assumptions. At points Russell provokes his readers to follow an unorthodox line of thought and thereby reconsider established meanings; we may not always agree with his conclusions, yet it is undeniable that the monograph alerts us to crucial if not easily communicable concerns the playwright transmits through his life work. The book also serves as evidence that Friel’s work does not cease to have the potential of inspiring thoughtful and inquisitive dialogues with and about it. As it boldly takes novel paths, *Modernity, Community, and Place in Brian Friel’s Drama* is unquestionably a must for dedicated scholars and students of Irish and world theater in general, and Friel’s drama in particular.

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