

## FRIEL AND HIS "SISTERS" Abbey Theatre talk<sup>1</sup>

**Nicholas Grene**

Trinity College Dublin

### **Abstract:**

This essay, occasioned by a revival of Brian Friel's version of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* at the Abbey Theatre in 2008, considers the circumstances surrounding its first production by the Field Day Theatre Company in 1981, and the motivation behind the decision to translate Chekhov's text into a specifically Irish dialect of English. It also analyses how Friel's plays since that date, notably the award-winning *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), have changed our perspective on the play.

**Keywords:** Field Day, aspiration, Hiberno-English, dancing, translation.

Field Day Theatre Company, founded in 1980 by Brian Friel and Stephen Rea, had a huge hit with their first production, Friel's play *Translations*. The aim of Field Day was to offer new and thought-provoking images of Ireland that might help in the context of the troubled state of things in Northern Ireland. It was important symbolically that the play opened in Derry's Guildhall, for so long associated with Unionist municipal governance in a city the majority of

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whose citizens were Catholic. It was important that the play toured far and wide across Ireland North and South before coming in to Dublin and the Theatre Festival. The play was acclaimed by audiences and critics wherever it went, by Protestants and Catholics, Unionists and Republicans. It achieved to a quite astonishing extent just what Field Day aimed to achieve, a form of theatre that could speak feelingly to Irish people of very different sorts and conditions across sectarian and political divisions. Field Day was well and truly launched on its way.

But that very success created a problem: what were they to do next? The Field Day company consolidated itself by recruiting extra members to what became a very illustrious board of directors: Friel and Rea were joined by Seamus Heaney and Seamus Deane, David Hammond and Tom Paulin. But none of these people were actually playwrights. Friel was still the one dramatist among them and, after the brilliant hit of *Translations*, it was bound to be to Friel that they looked for a follow-up. Even Brian Friel, though, couldn't be expected to come up with a new original play every year, so instead he gave them a translation of *Three Sisters*. It might not have seemed the most obvious choice. What could a Russian play originally written in 1901 have to say to Ireland eighty years later? How would a version of Chekhov fit into the Field Day objectives? And why would Brian Friel want to do a translation of the play anyway?

Friel's objective in taking on the play was to provide a specifically Irish *Three Sisters*. In an interview at the time he made this clear:

The first purpose in doing *Three Sisters* like this is because for a group of Irish actors, only American or English texts are available. If it's an English text of a Russian scenario, there's a double assumption there. I felt we should be able to short-circuit this double assumption so that they [the actors] can assume a language that can simply flow out of them. (qtd. in Muray 99)

Productions of Chekhov in English had a way of sounding very Home Counties, very Bloomsbury. Friel was bent on moving Chekhov from Bloomsbury to Ballybeg. After all, if Chekhov was originally Russian, the Irish had just as much right to appropriate him as the English.

This fitted in with the Field Day aspiration to provide Irish people with forms of theatre with which they could identify, that weren't imported from elsewhere. But it also corresponded to a longstanding impulse within Irish theatre going right back to the start of the twentieth century in re-making classic plays for Irish audiences. The Abbey, as the National Theatre Society, had as one of its founding aims the staging of major European classics as well as home-grown Irish plays, if only to provide models for Irish playwrights. Lady Gregory famously translated the comedies of Molière into Kiltartan, her own distinctive Hiberno-English dialect; the miser and the would-be gentleman in her versions talked as if they came from East Galway. Yeats was to do adaptations of Sophocles' Oedipus plays in the 1920s. But there was also a long history specifically of productions of Chekhov in Ireland or with significantly Irish connections. *Uncle Vanya* had been produced in Dublin before 1916, and in the 1930s Tyrone Guthrie commissioned a new translation of *The Cherry Orchard* from his brother-in-law, the Irish essayist Hubert Butler. In 1981, the very year of Friel's translation of *Three Sisters*, Tom Kilroy—later himself to become a director of Field Day—did an adaptation of *The Seagull* which was staged in London and Dublin. This re-located the play to a crumbling big house somewhere in the West of Ireland. Konstantin Treplev, the young would-be dramatist, son of the famous actress Arkadina, became a Yeats-like figure trying to stage a fey Celtic Revival drama, mocked by his mother used as she was to traditional nineteenth-century theatre. The analogy worked well in making Chekhov immediately accessible to an Irish audience, and established a sense of a special relationship between Chekhov's Russian scene and an Irish equivalent. That has now become a standard feature of Irish theatre over the last twenty-five years. Friel went on to do an *Uncle Vanya* revived last year at the Gate; Frank McGuinness has done

both an *Uncle Vanya* and a *Three Sisters* of his own; there was a version of *The Cherry Orchard* by Tom Murphy in the Abbey in 2004, part of the theatre's centenary year.

Still, none of this exactly explains why *Three Sisters* in 1981 seemed an apt choice for Field Day Theatre Company with their specific agenda. After all, early twentieth-century Russia as portrayed in the play was not really very like late twentieth-century Ireland. Anyone in 1981, in however remote a part of Donegal or Derry, could take a bus to Dublin or Belfast if they wanted to get a taste of the pleasures of the capital. Where in Ireland could you find an equivalent to the three sisters, stuck in a city of a hundred thousand people, a cultural desert, so remote from Moscow that getting back there is always going to remain a hopeless dream? Chekhov never names his city, but he didn't need to: there would have been hundreds like it in the provincial Russia of his time—literally thousands of miles away from Moscow or Petersburg, some distance even from the railway station that could connect you with them. That is a situation quite unlike being stuck in Friel's trademark village of Ballybeg.

I think, though, that it was the sense of being stuck that might have struck a chord for Irish audiences in the 1980s, the dreariness and hopelessness of so many lives. It was, of course, a terrible time in Northern Ireland, the year of the hunger strikes, which affected the whole country. Field Day would not have wanted to address that highly divisive political issue directly. Instead Friel dramatises the sense of frustration and depression in ordinary lives, and the desire to transcend those lives as they were. The characters in *Three Sisters* repeatedly lament the way they live, and wonder about how it might be improved, how it might be different in generations to come. Chekhov himself at one point in his life was attracted to the Utopian teachings of his great older contemporary Tolstoy. (Though they belonged to different generations, and were very different writers, they became friends. Tolstoy didn't think much of Chekhov's plays, but he was in good company there: Tolstoy didn't think much of Shakespeare either.) A

return to the simple life, to hard manual labour, was Tolstoy's recipe for putting right the ills of a developed civilisation. There are traces of this in *Three Sisters* in the speeches of Vershinin, Tusenbach and even Irina, as you will see. But Chekhov became sceptical of such magic bullet prescriptions, and the people who express such beliefs in his plays tend to be ever so gently mocked. Let's sit around and talk about the joys of work while the servants slave in the background getting us our meals. What he does sympathise with is the need his characters feel for another life, a better, different life, if only a hundred years from the present. And it is that sympathy that Friel too shares, and probably felt his 1980s Irish audiences would share too. Field Day wasn't in the business of proposing instant resolutions to the problems of the day; *Three Sisters* is in many ways quite a bleak play. But it is a play of humane compassion and generous feeling for those forced to live in hope and aspiration.

A Friel version of *Three Sisters* provided Field Day with a production to tour in 1981 as a follow-up to their successful debut with *Translations* the year before. But the play and the playwright meant a lot more to Brian Friel than that. When he had been a beginning playwright in 1963, he was famously invited by the Irish theatre director Sir Tyrone Guthrie to come and watch him direct in the about to be opened Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis. Friel has again and again paid tribute to Guthrie and how important this experience was in giving him his first extended sense of how professional theatre worked, and his breakthrough play *Philadelphia Here I Come!* was staged the following year. One of the two plays Guthrie directed in that 1963 season was Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. So in choosing that play to translate in the 1980s, Friel was paying a double homage – to Guthrie and to Chekhov.

Chekhov has been a hugely important influence on Friel's work. His 1978 play *Aristocrats*, in particular, most people would see as typically Chekhovian. As in the Russian dramatist, Friel's play centres on a country house and a dysfunctional family, the messed-up lives of

a group, each with their own distinctive problems, each tied in with the others, partly funny, partly appalling. A key feature of the work of the two playwrights is the fact that they started their careers as short story writers, and it shows in their plays. Chekhov's characters are often like people from short stories, telling those stories aloud. So we get Olga's opening speech, which you will be hearing shortly: "It's hard to believe it's only a year since Father's death, isn't it? Twelve months to the day. The fifth of May. Your birthday, Irina. Do you remember how cold it was? And there was snow falling. I thought then I'd then I'd never get over it" (*Three Sisters* 11). Other playwrights go to great lengths to try to obscure the fact that they are giving the audience the necessary information—those elaborate conversations between first and second gentleman—"I thought the king had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall". Chekhov has Olga instead, as it were, musing aloud on the backstory of the death of their father the general a year before the action starts. Or later in the third act, Colonel Vershinin describes the day that has been dominated by the great fire in the city: "It has been such a strange day [...] As soon as the fire started I ran home as fast as I could. When I got near the house I could see that it wasn't in danger. And my two girls were standing at the front door in their pyjamas. No sign of their mother. People charging about, shouting, screaming—horses, dogs going mad—it was all so [...] If you'd seen the look on the children's faces: a mixture of terror and horror and entreaty. That was more terrifying than all the horrors around me. And I thought: my God, I thought, how much more have these children to go through in the years ahead" (*Three Sisters* 82). Nobody is actually listening to him: he is telling the story to himself. This kind of technique of self-narration is typical of Chekhov. It's as though his characters are standing outside themselves, telling and at the same time observing their own lives, commenting and reflecting on them.

Friel also transfers his story-telling craft to the theatre in his use of narrators and monologues in plays like *Faith Healer* or again *Dancing at Lughnasa*. In *Philadelphia Here I Come!* it is as though he split the

Chekhov character in two. Public Gar is there on stage going about his business as he prepares to leave for America in the morning, saying little beyond the ritual exchange of grunts with his father, having awkward conversations with his friends, the local lads, and an even more awkward conversation with his ex-girlfriend whom he didn't get to marry. But all the time there is another Private Gar on stage with him to comment on those actions, say what he cannot say, tell the inner story that he is incapable of telling in his "Public" incarnation. Chekhov is famously the master of the subtext, the unspoken feelings that we can read between the lines. In Private Gar Friel gives that subtext a voice.

Plays come to look very different over time, if only because the playwrights go on to write other plays that change our perspective on the earlier ones. I have been concentrating so far on talking about Friel's version of *Three Sisters* as it appeared in 1981: the reasons why Field Day might have chosen to put it on in that year, the reasons Friel had for wanting to adapt that play, his feelings for Chekhov. But his translation of Chekhov's play about three sisters is seen in a different light at this distance of time because of Friel's own most famous 1990 play about five sisters. Our knowledge of *Dancing at Lughnasa* changes our sense of Friel's *Three Sisters*.

Brian Friel grew up with two sisters of his own, but in his mother's generation there were no less than seven sisters. He reduced them to five in *Lughnasa* for the sake of economy – and still Irish women actors have reason to feel very grateful to him for providing them with a God-sent opportunity: a play with five great female parts! As everyone knows, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, dedicated "In memory of those five brave Glenties women", is based on his own childhood experience of holidays with his aunts. His mother, of course, was not unmarried like Chris in the play, but in other respects the lives of his aunts provided the model for the situation of the Mundy sisters. Friel in 1936, the time of the play's action, was just seven, the age of the child Michael whose story is told by his older narrator self. Where in 1981, the focus of *Three Sisters* might have been on the social situation of the characters, and

the novelty of its use of an Irish idiom for its version of Chekhov, after *Lughnasa* we are likely to be aware of it as a play specifically about the lives of women.

What the two plays have most in common is the representation of the predicament of their female protagonists, with heavily restricted personal choices in their lives, largely dependent on men – unreliable, untrustworthy or disappointing men. The hopes of Chekhov's Prozorov sisters rest on their brother Andrei. He is the brilliant student, the gifted musician, who is going to be a professor and take them all back to their longed-for Moscow and the life they dream about. As the play goes on, it is apparent no such future is going to materialise. Andrei marries a frightful local girl, turns to gambling and ends up proud to gain the position of permanent clerk to the local council. The situation in Ballybeg is different, but there are analogies. The Mundy sisters may be poor, live as they used to say in "reduced circumstances", but they have one source of family pride, one source of community kudos: their missionary priest brother Father Jack. When Father Jack gets back from Africa, however, that idolised family icon is shattered. Jack has gone "strange" in his years working about the Ugandan lepers; instead of converting the natives to Catholicism as he was supposed to do, they have converted him to paganism. The Mundy sisters' one claim to local respect becomes their disgrace.

The five Mundy women live lives of enforced celibacy. Maggie the joker of the family, permanently addicted to cigarettes, speculates at one point about the relative merits of a wild Woodbine and a man – and comes down in favour of the man. The choices are few, and those few unsatisfactory or unavailable: Austin Morgan the local shopkeeper, who of course will not in the end marry the ageing schoolteacher Kate; the already married Danny Bradley, who wants to meet the innocent Rose up in the back hills by Lough Anna for more than just milk and chocolate biscuits, we can assume; and of course the charming good-for-nothing Gerry, lover of Chris, father of Michael, who shows up once every year or so, and never discloses the fact that he has a wife and



family in Wales. Olga sums up the equivalent position of the sisters in Chekhov when she urges Irina to marry, even though she is not in love: "what you must understand, my darling, what you must learn to accept is that one doesn't marry for love; one marries out of duty" (*Three Sisters* 89). Maybe so, but again the choices are not encouraging. There is no-one to marry Olga herself, also an ageing schoolteacher like Friel's Kate in *Lughnasa*. Masha has married indeed, when she was too young to know just how boring her husband was, and she lives with the consequences. The plight of the youngest sister Irina is cast between those two negative alternatives. The lives of the men in Chekhov and in Friel may not be happy either, but they do have jobs, activities, options about leaving or staying: Gerry in *Lughnasa* can join up and go off to the Spanish Civil War; the soldiers in *Three Sisters* will be transferred to another part of the Russian empire. The sisters in both plays are stuck where they are.

One of the problems in translating any play from another language, another culture, is finding equivalents for the easily recognizable allusions in the original that will be baffling to a foreign audience. So in *Three Sisters*, Chekhov's characters regularly quote snatches of poems, plays and stories by Pushkin, Lermontov and Gogol, the great classics of nineteenth-century Russian literature whose work would have been immediately familiar to Chekhov's audience, and Friel had to deal with these as best he could in his Irish version. But even more problematic, in a way, is the use of songs where both the melody and the lyrics provide a part of the significance of the drama. It is interesting to see how Friel handles song and dance in *Three Sisters*, especially in the light of their importance in *Dancing at Lughnasa*.

Take the case of Chebutykin, the old army doctor who hangs around the sisters, and provides a sort of comic counterpoint to the drama throughout. He has an absurd little snatch of song that he sings or hums recurrently, which most translators translate as something like "Ta-ra-ra boom-de-ay / I'm sitting on a tomb today", which it seems is a specifically Russian version of the American song. Chekhov's original

audiences would have known it well in this form and seen it as a fitting expression of Chebutykin's defeated cynicism. The trick is to try to find something that works in an equivalent way for an English-speaking Irish audience. What Friel has done is to substitute an English music-hall song from 1906: "There I was waiting at the church". In the original lyrics, it is the comic/pathetic story of the lady deserted on her wedding day by the man who promised to marry her but turns out to be married already. In the play, Friel changes the genders to make it refer to Chebutykin's own situation: "When I found she'd left me in the lurch, [she for he] / Oh how it did upset me". Chebutykin was in love with the mother of the three sisters and never married because of his unrequited love. But the song also reflects obliquely on the situation of the sisters in the play disappointed in love or in marriage.

There isn't much dancing in Chekhov's play but there is significantly more in Friel's version, and even more significantly dancing that almost happens but doesn't. In the party scene in Act II in Chekhov's original, Baron Tusenbach "sits down at the piano and plays a waltz". Masha "waltzing alone" responds with an improvised line "the Baron is drunk, is drunk, is drunk!" (Chekhov 238). Friel expands on this by specifying the Blue Danube as the tune the Baron plays and making Masha waltz to its rhythm: "The baron is drunk, is drunk, is drunk" (*Three Sisters* 65). This, though, is building on an incident earlier in the act which is entirely of Friel's invention.

One of Chebutykin's absurd characteristics is his tendency to note pointless trivia that he reads in the newspaper. In Act II, he reads out the statement "Balzac was married in Berdichev" (Chekhov 233) and goes to write it down in his notebook. It is an oddity in the biography of the great French novelist that he married very late in his life in an obscure provincial town in Russia, and it's typical of the sort of unconnected scraps of information that Chebutykin might collect. It's repeated by Irina absentmindedly but then goes nowhere. Look out tonight at what Friel does with this. He renders the original as "Balzac was married in Berdichev town", which makes it possible for Irina to

sing it, another of the characters to pick up the tune on a guitar. They move into an improvised duet which might perhaps spread, as suggested in the stage directions: "Pause. There is a sense that this moment could blossom, an expectancy that suddenly everybody might join in the chorus—and dance—and that the room might be quickened with music and laughter. Everyone is alert to this expectation; it is almost palpable, if some means of realising it could be found. VERSHININ moves closer to MASHA. If the moment blossoms, they will certainly dance" (*Three Sisters* 55). It is like a dry run for the dance which finally does break out in the first act of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, breaks out but then comes to a similarly aborted stop.

In Act II of *Three Sisters*, the group is all looking forward to the arrival of the mummers and the introduction of song, dance, gaiety into the house. They never actually appear; they are forbidden entry on an obvious pretext by Natasha, the predatory wife of Andrei, who is bent on dispossessing the sisters and forcing them out. The non-appearing mummers represent the absent vitality and communal spirit that the sisters so need and are denied. In *Dancing at Lughnasa* this is the function of the harvest dance, the harvest dance to which most of the Mundy sisters long to go, but which their repressive older sister Kate tell them they cannot attend because they are too old and too respectable. The dance of the sisters alone on stage is a substitute for the harvest dance they will never be able to join in. Friel builds on something that is there in Chekhov, the sense of the frustrations of women's lives, but he shapes it into something characteristic of his own dramatic vision of the denial of female sexuality and its physical expression.

"Let everything on the stage be just as complex and at the same time just as simple as in life. People dine, merely dine, but at that moment their happiness is being made or their life is being smashed" (qtd. Jackson 73). Chekhov's famous dictum about drama could apply just as well to Friel. Neither of them ever write conventional comedy or conventional tragedy. I have talked about *Three Sisters* as a very bleak play, but it is at the same time a very funny play, as I am sure you will

find tonight. Just as a character in Chekhov is winding up towards a big emotional speech, something ridiculous is bound to happen to deflate it. As Frank Hardy says of his own performance in *Faith Healer*, "we were always balanced somewhere between the absurd and the momentous" (*Selected Plays* 336). That's very much Chekhov, and it's very much Friel.

Theorists of translation talk about two contrary impulses within the process, the desire to make the original familiar or strange. You can try to give a version which is domesticated, made at home, as it were in the target language, a Chekhov play as if it was actually written in English. Or alternatively, you can try to be as faithful as possible to the meanings of the source text, to give your audience the feeling of its foreignness to them. In so far as Friel in his version of *Three Sisters*, as part of the Field Day agenda, sought to render the dialogue in a specifically Irish English for Irish audiences, he went for the first of these two alternatives. He wanted to get away particularly from the English English version of Chekhov's Russia, a sort of double foreignness for Irish people, and give them instead characters who spoke in a language like our own. And yet, this remains a play set in Tsarist Russia, sixteen years before the Revolution, provincial Russia with its samovars and vodka and immense distances. Friel did not relocate the play to Ireland, as Kilroy did with *The Seagull*; *Three Sisters*, even if its characters speak in a language that sounds familiar to contemporary Irish people, is still set at a historical as well as a geographical distance from ourselves. And that is what classic drama is all about. It is not just about making the characters and situations seem like your own lives – God forbid that your lives should seem like those of the Prozorov sisters in this play. Rather, it gives us imaginative entry to a world that is not our own, makes it vivid enough and recognizable enough so we can experience what it is to live different lives in other times, other cultures. This was the experience of Irish audiences around the country in 1981 with Friel's version of *Three Sisters*; this is the experience you will be having 27 years later again tonight. Enjoy it.

## Notes

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