O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

—William Butler Yeats
from "Among School Children"

Love, laughter, and bittersweet memories fill the stage as the Indiana Repertory Theatre presents Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* March 14 through April 9 on the Mainstage. IRT artistic director Libby Appel, who directs this production, first staged the work at the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta last year. This hauntingly beautiful drama was winner of the 1992 Tony Award for Best Play. Five strong, quarrelsome, fiercely loving sisters scratch out a living in an isolated Irish village in the 1930s. Their sputtering wireless brings them fragments of music and bits of news from the mysterious outside world. One of the sisters has a seven-year-old son, Michael, born out of wedlock. One eventful August, as the sisters prepare for the harvest festival of Lughnasa (pronounced LOO-na-sa), the sisters' brother returns from mission work in Africa, and the boy's absent father stops for a rare visit. It is Michael's memories of that long-ago summer—the summer when everything changed—that make up *Dancing at Lughnasa*. "It reminds you how moving, funny, real, and utterly exhilarating great theatre can be." —*USA Today*

BY BRIAN FRIEL

At the age of 65, Brian Friel is considered Ireland's finest living playwright. He was born in the tiny village of Glenties, County Donegal, and still lives less than 60 miles from there. After studying for the priesthood, he became a teacher instead. He wrote short stories, which began to appear regularly in *The New Yorker*, as well as radio plays and eventually stage plays. Friel became friends with Tyrone Guthrie, who was a fan of his stories, and joined the legendary director when he came to America to inaugurate the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis. Upon his return to Ireland, Friel wrote *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, the play that established him internationally. Although he continued

for the next dozen years to produce new work, he remained more of a figure in Ireland than in England or the United States until 1979 and 1980, when in a period of 18 months he wrote *Aristocrats, Faith Healer*, and *Translations*, considered to be three of his best plays. Also in 1980, he joined with actor Stephen Rea (*The Crying Game*) to found Field Day, a publishing house and theatre company which tours on both sides of the Irish border and seeks to form a ground for dialogue between Protestants and Catholics. A fallow period in the mid-1980s was broken by the award-winning *Dancing at Lughnasa*. His *Wonderful Tennessee* (which has been described as Ireland's *The Big Chill*), ran briefly on Broadway in fall 1993. A new production of *Translations*, starring Brian Dennehy, opens March 19 on Broadway. *Mollie Sweeney*, his latest play, is currently playing at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin.

The village of Ballybeg, the setting for *Dancing at Lughnasa* and most of Brian Friel's plays, is a fictional place whose name derives from the Gaelic Baile Beag—"small town." *Dancing at Lughnasa* was inspired in part by Friel's own childhood, when he spent several summers with his mother and her sisters at his grandparents' house. The play had its world premiere at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, April 24, 1990. In October 1990 the production transferred to the National Theatre in London, where it won the Olivier Award for Best Play. It arrived on Broadway October 24, 1991, with four of the five original actresses. The play was nominated for eight Tony awards and won three, including Best Play. Since then it has been performed to great acclaim at regional theatres throughout the United States. ★

CREATIVE TEAM

DIRECTOR	Libby Appel—IRT Artistic Director: *A Raisin in the Sun, Hamlet*
SET DESIGNER	Marjorie Bradley Kellogg—numerous Broadway productions
COSTUME DESIGNER	Deborah M. Dryden—Oregon Shakespeare, Berkeley Rep.
LIGHTING DESIGNER	Robert Peterson—IRT: *On the Razzle, Much Ado about Nothing*
CHOREOGRAPHER	David Hochoy—IRT: *Crow and Weasel, Much Ado about Nothing*

CAST

CHRIS	Susan Appel—IRT: *The Cherry Orchard, The Miser*
GERRY	David Bonanno—IRT: *She Loves Me*; Goodman Theatre
ROSE	Sinead Colreavy—Irish Bronx Theatre; Off-Broadway; Asolo Theatre
MICHAEL	Erik Fredricksen—IRT: *The Servant of Two Masters* (1974)
KATE	Darrie Lawrence—IRT: *Rain* (1982); Guthrie; Cincinnati Playhouse
JACK	William Leach—Milwaukee Chamber Theatre; Roundabout
MAGGIE	Priscilla Lindsay—IRT: *God's Pictures, Shirley Valentine*
AGNES	Pamella O'Connor—Alliance Theatre; Allegheny Regional

I R T

INDIANA REPERTORY THEATRE

March 1995

Dear Subscriber,

I first encountered *Dancing at Lughnasa* (that's *LOO-na-sa*—don't worry, it took me a year to learn how to pronounce it too!) on Broadway in 1992, the year it won the Tony Award for Best Play. For years I had loved Brian Friel's work, intrigued by his extraordinary gifts as a storyteller, entranced by his use of lyrical language and exquisite imagery, as well as deeply touched by his acute and sensitive understanding of the human heart. Plays like *Lovers: Winners and Losers, Translations, Philadelphia Here I Come*, and *The Faith Healer* are favorites of mine, but I had never had the opportunity to direct the work of Ireland's foremost living dramatist. When I saw the New York production, I was very moved by the plight of the Mundy family, who live isolated lives in their impoverished rural home in northwestern Donegal in 1936. The arduous pressures to eke out a living and the repressive, small-minded environment, combined with the explosions into spirited, primitive dance, make the play startling and thrilling. By the end of the first act I had watery eyes, and by the end of the evening I was dissolved in tears and absolutely exhilarated at the same time. I knew I had just encountered a masterful piece of playwrighting.

Then the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta asked me to direct *Dancing at Lughnasa* in early 1994, and I jumped at the chance. Indeed I enjoyed the process of exploring this beautiful play so much that I determined to bring it to my own audience at the IRT this season.

Dancing at Lughnasa is a memory play, related to us by Michael Mundy, 30 or so years after the summer when he was seven years old and the world was on the eve of outbreak into war. It is late August, the time of the annual harvest festival of Lughnasa. The festival had its roots in early pagan rituals as a period of Thanksgiving to the ancient god Lugh, who brought bounteous crops. It was marked by unbridled celebration, dancing, and gathering bilberries on the hillsides.

Three major events make this particular summer of 1936 so meaningful to Michael. First, his Uncle Jack returns to Ireland after 25 years as a missionary in Africa. Jack, who had been the five Mundy sisters' pride and joy, is no longer the locally renowned Catholic priest brimming with youthful vigor and religious enthusiasm; he is an old, confused man more indoctrinated to native African ways than to the rigorous dogma of the church. Where he had once brought status to his sisters in the community, he now brings them shame. Secondly, the family has acquired a radio, a major event in their lives because it brings news and music from a world outside their immediate environment; it puts them in touch with a world of "otherness" they

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had never known before. Finally, Michael's father Gerry, who has been an infrequent visitor to Michael's home and who has never married his mother, comes to see them twice in a three-week period, and the boy has the opportunity to observe his father and mother together. These immediate, personal events in the little boy's memory are surrounded by the world changes of increased industrialization, the Great Depression, and impending war, all of which will touch the Mundy's lives irrevocably. This is a pivotal time, because these circumstances disturb the calm routine of the family's rural existence and threaten to crumble the walls of civility and reserve that have held them thus far together.

But Friel doesn't mourn change; he celebrates the coming together of opposites in the human spirit: the pagan in us must mix with the civilized at times or we will be left with unfulfilled lives of quiet desperation. The playwright is never judgmental; he looks at the human soul and presents it to us without sentimentality or prejudice and with a skillful blend of comedy and tragedy. He transforms a tale of tension between the spiritual mysteries and passions within us and the strict social codes of behavior into an uplifting, poetic, and magical experience. The play is almost like a dream in that it shapes memories into an impressionistic and evocative musical landscape of suspended time. When Michael ends his journey back to his childhood, he emerges as a true poet who can shape reality into metaphor. His last speech conveys this understanding and artistry: "When I remember it, I think of it as dancing. Dancing with eyes half closed because to open them would break the spell. Dancing as if language had surrendered to movement—as if this ritual, this wordless ceremony, was now the way to speak, to whisper private and sacred things.... Dancing as if language no longer existed because words were no longer necessary."

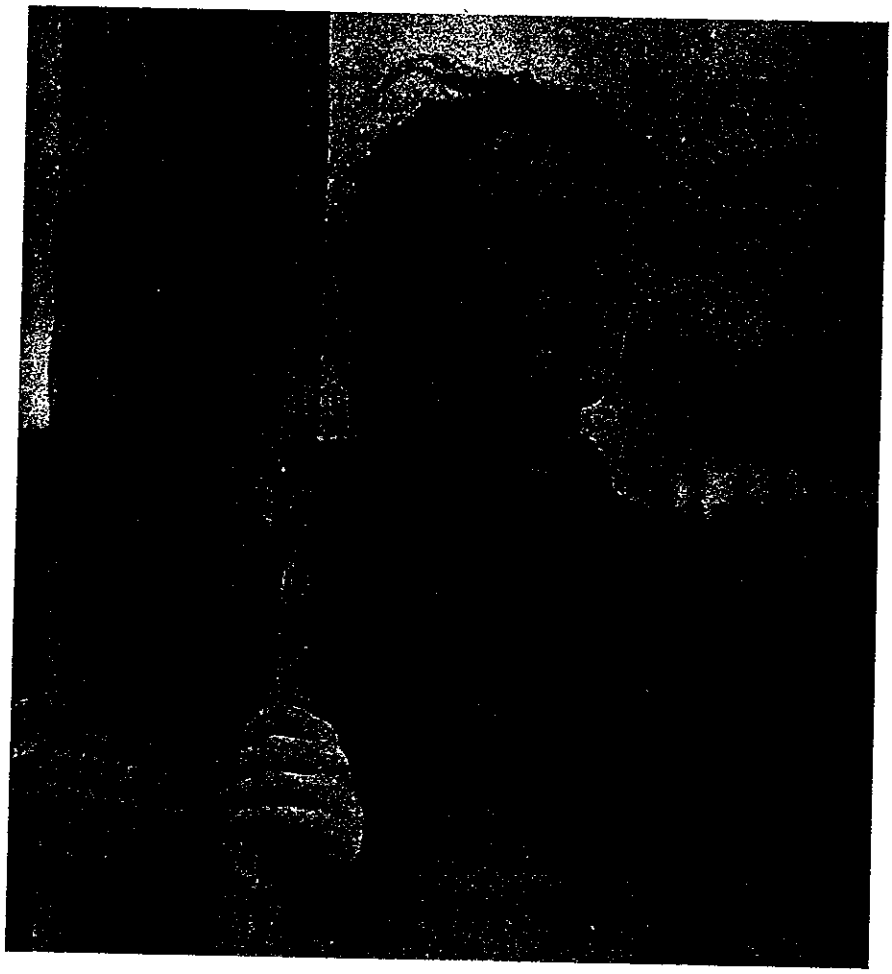
Our production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* is influenced by the play's metaphors and impressions of memory rather than a realistic depiction of time and place. The set represents not a realistic kitchen or garden, but only suggestions of those areas, situated on a raked wooden platform that continuously sweeps upward as it "dances" to the ceiling. The painting of this wooden backdrop is reminiscent of Vincent Van Gogh in its heavy brushstrokes and vibrant colors. The Van Gogh influence is carried into the sparse furnishings reminding us of his eerie yet joyful painting of his bedroom at Arles. The costumes are functional and speak to who these people are, but the patterns and colors of the fabrics and the layers of the clothing subtly hint at linoleum, wallpaper, and upholstery which might be found in their home. The whole stage picture is held together by extraordinarily liquid lighting which provides the dreamy quality of memory through soft-edged patterns and multiple colors.

For me, returning to this play this season is like re-living a great moment in my life. Not many of us have the opportunity to re-live those moments—but Michael does as he suspends time and moves backwards to the fateful summer of 1936. And I do as I share this re-telling of my production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* with you. Only in the theatre are these magic moments made possible for all of us.

See you at the theatre!

Bobby

"When I cast my mind back to that summer of 1936 different kinds of memories offer themselves to me..."



I think there's a need for the pagan in life. I don't think of it as disrupting Christianity. I think of it as disrupting civility. If too much obeisance is offered to manners, then in some way we lose or suppress the grumbling and dangerous beast that's underneath the ground. This denial is what causes the conflict.

I think there is a value in religion. I think whether we want to call it religion or the acknowledgement of mystery or a salute to the otherness, it can be enriching. I think self-fulfillment is the realization of that otherness. But in Ireland we have perverted that enriching process and made it into some kind of disabling process.

The spiritual is difficult to dramatize. I suspect we have lost some of the vocabulary. Conventional religious vocabulary has been so demeaned that it's not appropriate. The audience—a word that has its root in the word for hearing—loses its "ear"; it either becomes deaf or tone-deaf.

Trust your voice. Just sing.

—Brian Friel
interview with John Lahr
Vogue, *October 1991*

Brian Friel. Photo by Richard Avedon.

Growing up in Ireland is unlike growing up anywhere else. There is more emotion per square yard than there is rainfall. That has not changed, at least not in the country, where the attachment to home and hearth is as deep and as binding as the longing to escape it.

—Edna O'Brien
from Vanishing Ireland

They would go here and there over the hill looking for bilberries. Sometimes they would scatter in pairs—boys and girls— and other times they would go in groups. When they returned...they all sat down on the hilltop and the boys began to make bilberry bracelets for the girls.... When that was done, a man or maybe a girl would be named to sing a song. The melody would begin then and would go round from one to another, and anyone who had a note of music at all in his head would have to keep the fun going. After the singing they would begin the dancing.... When all was over then and they were preparing to go home, the girls would take off the bilberry bracelets and leave them on the hilltop. Whatever meaning there was to that, none of the old people were able to tell me, but they all knew it and they heard from their elders that it was customary for them to do that.

—an oral account from County Donegal, 1942
translated from the Irish by Maire MacNeill

SYNOPSIS

History records momentous events for the month of August 1936 — a war in Spain, threats of Hitler and Mussolini. But in his small corner of Ireland, seven year old Michael Evans finds this August, the month of the Festival of Lughnasa, important for other reasons.

Dancing at Lughnasa introduces us to Michael and his memories of his seventh summer. Through his eyes we see his Uncle Jack, a priest returned home from Africa after many years away. We spy upon the comings and goings of Michael's elusive father, Gerry Evans. And, most importantly, we meet the five Mundy sisters — Michael's mother, Chris, and his aunts.

The world of the Mundy sisters is a simple one outside the village of Ballybeg in County Donegal, Ireland. They live on the income earned by schoolteacher Kate, the eldest, and on what Rose and Agnes make knitting gloves to be sold in the village. Despite their poverty the sisters share a certain joy and closeness, and it is this joy of life that Michael witnesses in the August when Uncle Jack and Gerry Evans enter the all female world of his childhood.

There is another visitor to the Mundy home that Lughnasa — the wireless radio dubbed "Marconi" by the sisters. The music of Marconi brings the Mundy sisters alive — and for a time in August, oblivious to the disasters looming ahead, the Mundy sisters dance. Their dance embraces the world about them in a kind of ecstatic joy and connects them to the ancient pagan spirit that Lughnasa celebrates. And although the Mundy sisters part and Michael's childhood world is soon lost, the music of August 1936 still lives, ringing in Michael's memory. Through the music we learn the Lughnasa dance of the Mundy sisters, and we are reminded of the primal joy of being alive.

If you're asking me will my story be as accurate as possible — of course it will. But are truth and falsity the proper criteria? I don't know. Maybe when the time comes my first responsibility will be to tell the best possible narrative. Isn't that what history is, a kind of story-telling? . . . Imposing a pattern on events that were mostly casual and haphazard and shaping them into a narrative that is logical and interesting. . . . I'm not sure that "truth" is a primary ingredient--is that a shocking thing to say? Maybe when the time comes, imagination will be as important as information.

Brian Friel, from "Making History"

No one will ever know or understand the fun there was; for there was laughing — foolish, silly fun and foolish, silly laughing; but what it was all about you can't remember, can you? Just the memory of it — that's all you have now — just the memory; and even now, even so soon, it is being distilled of all its coarseness; and what's left is going to be precious, precious gold. . .

Philadelphia, Here I Come!, by Brian Friel

PORTRAIT OF THE MEMORY OF A YOUNG MAN: BRIAN FRIEL'S DANCING AT LUGHNASA

by Joan K. Andrews

What is a fact in the context of autobiography? A fact is something that happened to me or something I experienced. It can also be something I thought happened to me, something I thought I experienced. Or indeed an autobiographical fact can be pure fiction and no less true or reliable for that.

Brian Friel, "Self-Portrait"

Brian Friel's life-long preoccupation with the role that verifiable facts play (or don't play) in one's personal autobiography was off to a flying start from the very beginning; he was born in County Tyrone in January of 1929, but sources differ on whether it was on the 9th or the 10th.

Considered to be Ireland's greatest living playwright, Friel was raised a Catholic in Northern Ireland and spent his summers with his maiden aunts in Western Ireland. He is, and has always been, strongly influenced by the landscape of his childhood, as well as the political upheaval and socio-economic unrest on both sides of the border. Friel writes about home, family, country, and the small corner of Donegal summed up in the imaginary town of Ballybeg (or baille beag, which means "small town" in Gaelic). He is a master at creating a sense of place, a sense of atmosphere, a ballybeg of the mind and heart. In his latest, most acclaimed play, Dancing At Lughnasa, Friel returns to Ballybeg to reinvent his autobiography and the story of the maiden aunts with whom he spent his summers.

The play, which won the Tony Award for Best Play and its London equivalent, the Olivier Award, is dedicated "in memory of those five brave Glenties women:" his mother and four aunts. It is a memory play, narrated by the character of Michael who also plays a boy of seven, the same age as Friel at the time of the play's action. Michael opens and closes the play with these lines: "When I cast my mind back to that summer of 1936 different kinds of memories offer themselves to me." Indeed, the play is a portrait of different kinds of memories; of homecomings and leavetakings which reveal the poignancy of a writer's selective process. Explaining the differences between what actually happened to "those five brave Glenties women" and what happens in the play, Friel has said, "The play provides me with an acceptable fiction for them now."

Existing on a shoestring, teaching school, and knitting gloves, the Mundy sisters nevertheless like a good time; they gossip and joke back and forth with good old Irish chat accompanying their daily, drab chores of washing and ironing, cooking and feeding the chickens. They share their home with their brother Jack, a burnt-out priest who has just come home from Africa after working for twenty-five years in a leper colony. The time of the year is early August; the time of the Irish pagan feast called Lughnasa (sounds like lunacy) after Lugh, the Celtic god of the harvest. The main setting is the kitchen, leading out to the garden. In the distance are seen the back hills from whence come wild tales of Lughnasa celebrations, including dancing and coupling, ritual bonfires, and animal offerings. But the Mundy sisters are unaware of the dark pagan river that runs deep inside them, and their discovery of it, creating their own Lughnasa in the

middle of the kitchen, is a high point of the play.

This drama comes from a revision of a personal memory. Friel originally studied for the priesthood at St. Patrick's College at Maynooth. When asked why he gave it up, he said, "It would somehow have been in conflict with my belief in paganism." Friel's play draws parallels between the pagan ceremonies observed by Uncle Jack in Africa and the Lughnasa excesses right outside the cottage door. For Michael, Uncle Jack's return is central to the memories during those Lughnasa weeks of 1936. Shuffling in and out of the kitchen, "shrunken and jaundiced with malaria," Uncle Jack, who can no longer say Mass, has become an embarrassment. The tired priest has forgotten many English words, having spoken Swahili all these years, and only shows signs of life when he recalls the ritual ceremonies of his pagan charges back in Uganda.

At the same time that Friel exposes the hypocrisy and mean-spiritedness of a society which ostracizes Uncle Jack in the name of Christianity, he reveals the basic decency and loving kindness at the heart of the family he so compassionately depicts. His world is peopled with lonely, sad souls whose illusions and dreams are doomed to failure. Yet despite what poet Seamus Deane has termed the characters' "unshakable apathy," they do display an exuberance, almost an animal joy, in living. It is this quality which often inspires critics to compare Friel with Chekhov; indeed, Friel himself has translated The Three Sisters. It is Friel's ability to choose a specific moment of time--however small--and render it in a universal language that makes him the true heir to the Russian master.

Friel speaks in a language beyond words from his imaginary town of Ballybeg to the rest of the world--and it understands. In the play, Michael talks of memory as if it were dancing: "Dancing as if language had surrendered to movement...Dancing as if language no longer existed because words were no longer necessary." In this dance at Lughnasa, the reality of the past can change. Friel's real-life models for Agnes and Rose were two maiden aunts who abruptly left the family home in the tiny village of Glenties, Ireland, and never returned; they ended up destitute and abandoned in London. But while the character Michael tells us that his Aunt Agnes died from overexposure, the play has her dancing and picking bilberries. Though we're told that Rose died a pauper's death in London, in the play she runs to meet her lover in her Sunday shoes. Through the magic and mystery of his art, Friel has made his family whole again.

MORE ON BRIAN FRIEL...

At the risk of diminishing Lughnasa by reducing it to a single meaning, I would say that it is about the need for alternatives. Firstly, it's about an alternative society of women and the ways they live. Drama is notorious for the under-representation of women and the play subtextually addresses that with Christina's opening line: "When are we going to get a decent mirror to see ourselves in?" The play also recognizes that women speak an alternative language, private in reference and nuance and atmosphere, merely because they have another kind of perception and identity to express. Set in the kitchen and the garden of their home, it shows the apparently ordinary domestic routine of their lives: running a household, minding the child and so on. The moral atmosphere seems thoroughly conventional. One of the sisters calls it "a Christian home, a Catholic home". But within minutes these cliches are subverted when "the simple sister," Rose, bursts into raucous song and dance. And from then on, the play is as much concerned with the subtexts women live by. Because in complete reversal of the usual stereotypes of women -- the better half, the civilizing and domesticating influence -- the play shows that women are perhaps closer to the unorthodox and irrational in life. As Christina's lover, Gerry Evans, says, maybe that's the important thing for a man, a named destination, "democracy, Ballybeg, heaven." Women's illusions aren't so easily satisfied. They make better drifters.

Judy Friel (Brian Friel's daughter), in a talk at the Arts Club of Chicago, April 23, 1993 (Ms. Friel is a director who had just directed the play in Warsaw, Poland).

I think there's a need for the pagan in life. I don't think of it as disrupting Christianity. I think of it as disrupting civility. If too much obeisance is offered to manners, then in some way we lose or suppress the grumbling and dangerous beast that's underneath the ground. This denial is what causes the conflict.

I think there is a value in religion. I think whether we want to call it religion or the acknowledgment of mystery or a salute to the otherness, it can be enriching. I think self-fulfillment is the realization of that otherness. But in Ireland we have perverted that enriching process and made it into some kind of disabling process.

The spiritual is difficult to dramatize. I suspect we have lost some of the vocabulary. Conventional religious vocabulary has been so demeaned that it's not appropriate. The audience -- a word that has its root in the word for hearing -- loses its 'ear'; it either becomes deaf or tone-deaf.

Trust your voice. Just sing.

Brian Friel
Interview with John Lahr, Vogue, Oct. 1991

THE FESTIVAL OF LUGHNASA

Although St. Patrick was able to rid Ireland of snakes in the fourth century, he wasn't quite as lucky with paganism. Paganism, with its rich mythology and rituals based on primal instinct, still pulls the culture apart even at its most civilized level. The traditions of paganism are still alive, despite all efforts by organized religion and "civilized" society.

Until just a few decades ago, the festival of Lughnasa was still celebrated on hilltops and at lakesides throughout Ireland. The name comes from the Celtic harvest god Lugh, a powerful figure likened to the earlier Greek and Roman deities Hermes and Mercury. The suffix "nasa" means "meeting " or "games." The festival originated with Lugh's promise to the people of a good harvest, if they would assemble in honor of his foster mother and his two dead wives. Lugh is also said to be the father of Cu Chulainn, the superhuman hero of Irish legend and the subject of a series of plays by Yeats.

Christianity's presence became increasingly powerful after Patrick's crusade, but the church realized it had to co-opt this popular end-of-summer tradition in order to ensure the church's own survival among the Irish people. Some Lughnasa festivals became pilgrimages to pay homage to Saints Patrick or Brigid, but the festival retained its role as a time to celebrate the new harvest, a harvest of wheat or potatoes. The actual date of the festival varied from region to region; the last Sunday in July seems to have been the most widely celebrated. The new potatoes were dug on this day, ending the last lean, hungry month before the new harvest. The end of hunger and famine was celebrated with a feast of "cally" -- mashed new potatoes cooked with butter, milk, and garlic. Upon sitting down to the table, the people would cry "Marbhfhaisg ar an gcailin rua!" ("Death to the red-haired hag!") to ward off the red-headed demon of hunger who would surely follow in the lean months to come.

What survived of Lughnasa above all else was the tradition of bilberry picking. Bilberries, a dark, sweet berry used in making wine, pastries and jam, ripen at this same time of year and were seen as gifts from the gods. After Blaeberry Sunday, as Lughnasa was also called, it was thought that the bilberry began to lose its flavor. Collecting the berries may have been the reason for climbing the surrounding hills, but once on the summit there was much more. The day's events included dancing, singing, games, and the weaving of garlands of flowers or bilberries. Vendors sold their wares at the larger assemblies, but often people brought their own oat cakes or sweets to share. The bilberries were picked by the pailful, often to be made into a special cake or wine associated with courtship. Many a match was made at Lughnasa, but it was thought to be bad luck to be married during the time of harvest. At some assemblies there might be a bonfire and a dance, but for most the day ended at sundown. Garlands were brought home for those who were unable to make the trip and the uneaten berries were put up for later use.

(continued...)

Most people didn't associate this summer outing with the pagan origins behind it. For most, it was a tradition remembered from year to year as an end-of-summer celebration, an occasion to climb the hills and pick the berries together. Yet Maire MacNeill notes in her book The Festival of Lughnasa that even as late as 1942 (six years after Brian Friel's play takes place), Lughnasa was being celebrated at a hundred and ninety-five sites in Ireland. It is no surprise, then, that the Mundy sisters of Ballybeg in Dancing at Lughnasa should want to take to the hills at the time of the harvest. The merriment and ecstasy of Lughnasa provide them with a power that comes from within, a deep and ancient birthright passed down from generation to generation for thousands of years.

-- Elizabeth Bennett

WHAT PEOPLE HAVE SAID ABOUT THE FESTIVAL OF LUGHNASA

"When they returned from their gathering of bilberries they had a strange custom. They all sat down on the hill-top and the boys began to make bracelets of bilberries for the girls. They had brought short threads in their pockets for the purpose... Each man would then compete with another as to which would make the best and prettiest bracelet for his own girl. When that was done, a man or maybe a girl would be named to sing a song. The melody would begin then and would go round form one to another, and anyone who had a note of music at all in his head would have to keep the fun going.

"After the singing they would begin the dancing. According to the old talk, they had no instrument for music at all; they had to make do with lilting. In those days boys and girls were good at lilting and they would make enough music for those who were dancing...

"When all was over then and they were preparing to go home, the girls would take off the bilberry bracelets and leave them on the hill-top. Whatever meaning there was to that, none of the old people were able to tell me, but they all knew it and they heard from their elders that it was customary for them to do that. They would all come down then and go home."

> An oral account from Gortahork, Co. Donegal, 1942. From the archives of the Department of Irish Folklore, University College Dublin, MS 891. Translated from Irish by Maire MacNeill in The Festival of Lughnasa, Dublin 1982. (As printed in Phoenix Theatre program for Dancing at Lughnasa).

"Yes, it is a rich language, Lieutenant, full of the mythologies of fantasy and hope and self-deception — a syntax opulent with tomorrows. It is our response to mud cabins and a diet of potatoes; our only method of replying to...inevitabilities."

> Translations, by Brian Friel

FUN FACTS TO KNOW

Before producing a play, it is important to understand as much as possible about all aspects of the play and its characters. Here are some interesting facts that will help you in your reading of Dancing at Lughnasa.

* **Ireland** spent many years under influence and control by her British neighbors. The **War of Independence** in which Kate was involved took place between 1919 and 1921 and was one of many attempts on the part of Ireland to escape that control. The first and most important was the Easter Rebellion, in 1916, in which nearly 2,000 civilians tried to declare Ireland a republic; the leaders of the rebellion were subsequently suppressed and hanged for treason. This only serve to fueled Irish desire for Independence, which translated into many more attempts, including one in 1919 led by the group Sinn Fein (which translates as "ourselves alone") which sought to form the Independent Irish Republic including its own Parliament. Great Britain suppressed this attempt and the War of Independence ensued. The leader of Sinn Fein at the time was a man named **Eamon de Valera**, who was later elected President of Ireland; Maggie refers to de Valera in song on page four of the play. In 1920, the Better Government of Ireland Act was passed giving North and South Ireland the right to elect their own, separate parliaments; it was 1922 before the last British troops pulled out of Ireland. However, it took many years of conflict and chaos for Ireland to extricate herself completely from British influence. Even now, religious and cultural conflict continues to rage between the southern Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.
* The **Spanish Civil War** pitted the established military, the political Right, and the Roman Catholic Church in Spain against a new "Popular Front," made up of Republicans, Socialists, Communists, and anti-clericals, and led by General Francisco Franco. Early on in the war, foreign powers began to intervene and Spain became a battleground for rival ideologies; part of this intervention took the form of the **International Brigades**, for whom Gerry travels to Spain to fight for the Popular Front.
* **Uganda** is a country in Africa made up predominantly of small villages inhabited by people of the Bantu race. It, like Ireland, spent many years under British control — as a British colony, in fact. One of the many forms that European influence in Africa took was in the form of missionaries, like Uncle Jack, who went to villages in Africa to spread the teaching of Christianity; even now, most of Uganda's educational systems, for example, are still run by various religious groups. During World War I, uprisings due to discontent with British rule sprung up all over East Africa, which were quelled by the British Army; it was during this time that Jack was a chaplain and left the village of Rwanga.
* Leprosy is a disease which forms white scales on the body and eats away at the flesh. Although it is only mildly communicable, people who suffer from leprosy are usually removed from an environment where they could infect others — usually to a leprosarium (**leper colony**), such as the one in which Uncle Jack worked.
* The **wellingtons** that Rose wears are a kind of waterproof boot that reach to the knee.

CLASSROOM QUIZ

Who is Michael's mother?
a. Gerry
b. Chris
c. Kate
d. Rose

Who is the schoolteacher?
a. Rose
b. Kate
c. Maggie
d. Bernie

When the play opens,
what is Michael making?
a. a plane
b. a boat
c. a kite
d. a flag

Michael's mother is
a. a teacher
b. unemployed
c. a knitter
d. a housekeeper

The story takes place in
a. London
b. USA
c. Ireland
d. Spain

When the sisters dance,
at the end of Act I, who
resists the dance?
a. Mike
b. Chris
c. Kate
d. Rose
e. None of the above.

Lugh is a _____ God.
a. African
b. Celtic
c. Greek
d. Chinese
e. not a god at all

Lughnasa is a festival of
a. Harvest
b. Dancing
c. Thanksgiving
d. Political Acceptance

Brian Friel is the
a. adaptor
b. playwright
c. director
d. actor who plays Uncle Jack

Gerry is best at
a. dancing
b. being a father
c. selling grammophones
d. being a soldier

In addition to Chris,
Gerry also kisses
a. Agnes
b. Kate
c. Maggie
d. Rose

During these festival of Lughnasa,
people pick
a. blueberries
b. blackberries
c. bilberries
d. raspberry
(Hint: these are used in baking and making wines but thought to go sour if picked the day after the festival.)

Kate is "let go" at her job because
a. of Jack's changed behavior
b. of her strange behavior
c. the Industrial Revolution catches up to Ballybe
d. she becomes engaged

After the character analysis, this MATCHING EXERCISE should be a breeze!

Marconi	no emotion when Jack left
Lugh	tells riddles
Jack	married a Swede
Maggie	fell off motor bike
Nina	should be a dressmaker
Curley McDaid	simple
Tim Carlin	a friend, mentor, house boy
Brian McGuinness	bald at sixteen
Vera McLaughlin	own arcade in town
Chris	Maggie's date at dance
Agnes	Bernie's date at dance
Austin Morgan	the wireless set
Kate	festival of harvest
Karl Sharpeggi	gave Jack a hat
Michael	German Priest
District commissioner	A Great African Goddess
Sophia McLaughlin	called Rose, "Rosebud"
Mother Mundy	engaged at fifteen
Brian Friel	brought wool gloves from sisters
Danny Bradley	mother of Michael
young Sweeney	schoolteacher
Obi	playwright
Okawa	burned by bonfire
Lughnasa	A Celtic God

****

TRUE OR FALSE

1. Gerry comes to visit every six months.

2. Kate is the oldest sister.

3. Maggie is the most accepting sister of Gerry and Chris's relationship.

4. Bernie has pure blond hair but her daughters have pure black hair.

5. Agnes and Rose take jobs at the new factory in Donegal Town.

6. The sisters dance to the music because it reminds them of their mother.

7. Jack trades his hat with Gerry the Nigerian way, by tossing it in the air first.

8. Jack's mother cried when he left because they had a fight and she didn't want him to leave.

9. Gerry had three other children, including another son named Michael

10. Agnes died of exposure in London.

THINGS TO PONDER (STUDY QUESTIONS)

Examine the sisters' relationship. What do you notice? Be specific. Who is the leader? The follower? Any special bonds? Compare these relationships with ones in your own life.

Create a background for Gerry and Chris. How did they get together?

Why does Gerry promise Michael a bike then not come through on his promise? Do you think he was ever going to get the bike? Why or why not? What about Gerry's other son, do you think he got a bike?

Why is dancing so important to this story? Why does almost every character dance? Why do the Mundy sisters dance? What is special about it? What does the dancing symbolize? Why do they dance the way they do? What do the Festival of Lughnasa and the title of the play have to do with this? Why is it the dancing that Michael remembers?

How did Rose's pet rooster die?

Why does Gerry send special love to Agnes?

Jack says that he'll lead mass on Sunday. What do you think that his mass would be like?

Gerry asks Chris to marry him. Why doesn't she think it to be a good idea?

Think about what happens to the characters after the play ends. Does the future of the Mundy family correspond with what you envisioned while reading the play? What else could have happened? What do you think Michael has been doing between the time the play takes place and when he finally tells the story?

How much do you think Brian Friel wrote about his own life in Dancing at Lughnasa? How much of the character of Michael do you think comes from Brian Friel's own experience? What in your own life could you think of about which to write a play?

LYRIC MASTERPIECE

Dancing at Lughnasa

by Brian Friel

March 14 — April 9, 1995

This hauntingly beautiful play, winner of the 1992 Tony Award for Best Play, introduces us to five strong-willed, sometimes quarrelsome, but always loving sisters in an isolated Irish village in the 1930s. Their sputtering wireless brings them fragments of music and bits of news from the mysterious outside world. But one fateful August, visitors from the past and the unstoppable march of the future bring irreversible changes to their lives. Overflowing with joy and sorrow, longing and pain, and bittersweet childhood memories, *Dancing at Lughnasa* will make your heart dance.

"It reminds you how moving, funny, real, and utterly exhilarating great theatre can be." —*USA Today*

The village of Ballybeg, the setting for *Dancing at Lughnasa* and most of Brian Friel's plays, is a fictional place whose name derives from the Gaelic Baile Beag—"small town." Ballybeg serves the same function in Friel's writing that Yoknapatawpa County does in Faulkner's: as a local focus to serve universal themes. *Dancing at Lughnasa* was inspired in part by Friel's own childhood, when he spent several summers with his mother and her sisters at his grandparents' house. The play had its world premiere at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, April 24, 1990. In October 1990 the production transferred to the National Theatre in London, where it won the Olivier Award for Best Play. It arrived on Broadway October 24, 1991, with four of the five sisters still played by their original actresses. The play was nominated for eight Tony awards and won three, including Best Play. Since then it has been performed to great acclaim at regional theatres throughout the United States.

BRIAN FRIEL, playwright

Dancing at Lughnasa

At the age of 64, Brian Friel in his prime has come to be considered Ireland's finest living playwright. He was born in the tiny village of Glenties and still lives less than 60 miles from there. After studying for the priesthood, he became a teacher instead. He wrote short stories, which began to appear regularly in *The New Yorker,* as well as radio plays and eventually stage plays. Friel became friends with Tyrone Guthrie, who was a fan of his stories, and joined the legendary director when he came to America to inaugurate the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis. Upon his return to Ireland, Friel wrote *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, the play that made his name internationally. Although he continued for the next dozen years to produce new work, he remained more of a figure in Ireland than in England or the United States until 1979 and 1980, when in a period of 18 months he wrote *Aristocrats, Faith Healer*, and *Translations*, considered to be three of his best plays. Also in 1980, he joined with actor Stephen Rea (*The Crying Game*) to found Field Day, a publishing house and theatre company which tours on both sides of the Irish border and seeks to form a ground for dialogue between the Protestants and the Catholics. A fallow period in the mid-1980s was broken by *Dancing at Lughnasa*, which won both London's Olivier Award and the 1992 Tony Award for best play. His newest play, *Wonderful Tennessee* (which has been described as Ireland's *The Big Chill*), ran briefly on Broadway in fall 1993.