Dancing at Lughnasa
by Brian Friel

“Dancing as if language no longer existed because words were no longer necessary...”
I’ve had the pleasure of talking to the cast and creative team of the Lyric Theatre’s 2015 production of *Dancing at Lughnasa*. During these conversations we touched on many subjects; religion, love, culture, oppression, dancing and of course, knitting. I hope I have captured for you the passion and that each of these artists have brought to their own individual journey.

And to Brian Friel, whose unfailing eye sees us all as we really are; human beings with a need to dance......

Unable to bring the cast with us on our journey into schools and colleges, we are offering you instead some conversations with the artists whose combined effort brings you this production.

I hope you enjoy reading their thoughts as much as I enjoyed talking with them.

**Niki Doherty**

*Creative Learning Coordinator*

The work of the Creative Learning department at the Lyric Theatre is funded by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and Belfast City Council.

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Dancing at Lughnasa by Brian Friel

Winner of an Olivier Award and a Tony Award, Dancing at Lughnasa is one of the most acclaimed and loved Irish plays of recent times.

Set in County Donegal in 1936 during the Celtic harvest festival of Lughnasadh, the play tells the story of the five Mundy sisters and their brother Jack, who has returned home from the missions after 25 years away.

The story is told by the sisters’ nephew, Michael, who recalls the summer spent with his aunts when he was seven years old. As August gives way to September, Michael recounts his memory of childhood in his native Ballybeg, where his aunts raised him in their crumbling, rural home and where once they danced. A wild, raucous dance. A dance to the exciting, fleeting melody of the past and a dance against the harsh, progressive beat of the present.

One of the greatest plays ever written, this is a play about dance - the dream-wild dance of our memories.

This new production, which marks the 25th anniversary of the play’s premiere in Dublin, is directed by award-winning Annabelle Comyn.

In association with the Lughnasa International Friel Festival, August 20 -31 - Ireland’s first annual cross border arts festival.
CAST (in order of appearance)

Michael Evans  Charlie Bonner
Christina Mundy  Vanessa Emme
Maggie Mundy  Cara Kelly
Agnes Mundy  Catherine Cusack
Rose Mundy  Mary Murray
Kate Mundy  Catherine McCormack
Fr. Jack Mundy  Declan Conlon
Gerry Evans  Matt Tait

CREATIVE TEAM

Writer  Brian Friel
Director  Annabelle Comyn
Set Designer  Paul O’Mahony
Costume Designer  Joan O’Clery
Lighting Designer  Chahine Yavroyan
Sound Designer  Fergus O’Hare
Choreographer  Liz Roche
Voice Coach  Brendan Gunn
COSTUME

In conversation with...

Joan O'Clery, Costume Designer....

Thursday 30th July 2015 10 days into rehearsal

I first saw Joan’s work at our read-through of the play when she presented her ideas to us in sketch form with some scraps of fabric to illustrate her thoughts. At a first read it is easy to see this play as simplistic and easy in terms of design. However, on further conversation with Joan it became apparent how detailed her vision was.
As costume designer of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, what is it you want your audience to think, or feel or see when watching this production?

It’s the one thing with costume generally, is that it’s the first signal the audience get about a character. So you are already using that language. So the minute somebody comes on stage there is an intentionality about what they are wearing no matter if its modern dress or period and that intentionality is what we call the costume. It’s the character revealing something of themselves, telling the audience something of themselves straight away. So that’s what you start with as a costume designer.

For this production of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, and for many productions actually, it is the set design that evolves first, the director will work with the set designer to come up with a world that feels right. And then I would react to that.

In this case Annabelle Comyn the director wanted a very bare and stripped back version of the play. It has been done where it has been a warm production over a few hot days in August and I think she wanted to strip that back a bit and make it bit more sparse and for the world to be harsher. So in reacting to Annabelle and Paul’s (set designer) thoughts I then start looking at shapes and fabrics from the time period and finding a colour scheme within that, that will work for this production.

**What kind of materials did you come up with?**

I looked at the indigenous materials that would have been available to the women in Donegal in the 1930s so you’ve got linen and wool and tweed and all of those fabrics that would have been manufactured around Northern Ireland at the time. Natural fabrics. Then within the colour scheme – it’s very un-patterned that we’ve chosen to use so it’s more about the texture.

Two of the characters are knitting. They are hand-knitting as machine knitting didn’t exist so anything that appears on stage has to be hand-knit so we’ve commissioned a knitter to make cardigans for us. And all the dresses and the aprons are being made here in the Lyric by the costume department. They would have been home-made - there weren’t many shops you went to, to buy a dress. It would be more likely you bought the fabric and made your dress at home.
And were there any sewing machines?

Perhaps a dressmaker in town may have had a trestle machine which didn’t work on electricity. They had a foot pedal. And the Mundy sisters didn’t have a sewing machine because there’s a comment made to Gerry about starting to sell them a he is a travelling salesman. So you do have to think about where do they get their clothes? Where do they come from – are they hand-me-downs?

The character Maggie who does all the sort of dirty work around the house like feeding the chickens, cleaning out the hen-house, I have her dressed in an old man’s shirt and it may have belonged to her father or Father Jack. But she doesn’t care what she looks like, she’s in old boots which are men’s boots and an old cardigan too.

And what about with Chrissie? It suggests she takes pride in her appearance as she is looking in the mirror at the top of the play. Did you feel you could highlight something in her costume to reflect this?

She’s pretty actress and it’s very a simple dress that we have come up for her. And there’s a prettiness to it with a delicate belt and some nice little buttons. It’s in the cut too as most dresses of that time were cut on the bias which means they drape in a different way and they are not so rigid. And also what that gives us in an allowance in the movement as they have this “dance” in the middle of the play, the actors need the freedom of movement and the bias cut helps them with that.

So as a costume designer you have to fit in with any physical action that might be in this or any other play?

Yes and in this case we have given the actresses underwear of that time as well.

And what do they look like?

They look like very unattractive thermal shorts actually! And it may be that you never actual see them but in the movement you may catch a glimpse of something and you don’t want the audience to be thrown in any way, for the picture to be interrupted. So all of that has to be considered.

But very often you come across that in a period piece, if an actor is wearing a corset for example, you have to work with that to allow for comfort, as an actor will not be used to wearing a corset every day.
In this production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* did you want your audience to see your design as realistic and authentic as possible?

I think what it is - is that on stage, you are creating a picture, you see everybody from top to toe. On screen you only see part of the actor its more from the shoulder up – but so when you have all the elements from the costume, the props, the set and the lights; it all has to make a complementary picture at all times. And without ever forgetting that the purpose is to tell the story. And I suppose it’s a successful costume design if you create a picture and that the audience almost forget it’s there – that they totally accept and believe it and that they are in that world.

**So do you feel that it is very much about the collaboration between all members of the creative team?**

Yes and it’s a collaboration that’s only in theory until you get to the technical rehearsal. It’s only in your head until that moment and there’s no point before that where you see it all together. People say do you get nervous on the first day of rehearsal but it’s at the technical rehearsal that I think “Ok, let’s see if this all works!”

During the technical rehearsal you stop and start and the lighting gets tweaked and the actors check their props etc., and that’s also an opportunity for me to tweak colours for example. Or whether a hem needs to come up or down. And you might also look at a cardigan for example and think that it looks too bright and it needs to be dyed to a darker colour.

**But the technical rehearsal is close to the first public performance – are you really under pressure?**

Yes the technical rehearsal is a very busy time for the costume department because you have a limited amount of time and availability of the costumes - to get them off the actor! - and to make any alterations.

And then we go into dress rehearsal and you aspire for the dress rehearsal to be as per show. And then when you go into previews you can tweak things here and there.

**Can you go to the lighting designer and debate the colour of the gel used in some of the lighting?**

I have been known to! For example certain colours of gels used in lighting will affect the colour tone of the fabric and skin tone of the actor. If blue gels or white lights are used you start to notice fine detail and if you put
Have you ever designed for a Friel play before?

Yes I’ve designed for several Friel plays and actually worked with Brian Friel when he was a director. It was on his play “Give Me Your Answer Do” in the Abbey theatre this was in the 1990s.

And did you take a naturalistic approach to that production?

Yes I did. Friel himself very much trusts that the actor, the director, the designer know what they are doing. And if you ask him a direct question about something he will remain quite mysterious and say “Whatever you think yourself” which is both freeing and terrifying at the same time!

That’s interesting because he is so subtle in his writing too.

He says it is all there in the script. What I have found with his work is if you go against it or think “I’ll try something else”, something will unravel. He’s such a brilliant writer – nothing is in his text without a reason.

In “Lughnasa” he has quite definite descriptions of the characters and that they are wearing particular things and this is for a strong reason. And sometimes it isn’t obvious until you are working on it and you realise that’s why that is there.
SET DESIGN

In conversation with........
Paul O’Mahony, set designer

Tuesday 28th July 2015 8 days into rehearsal

Previous productions of Dancing at Lughnasa have been presented as quite romantic with an air of nostalgia and many designers have approached their set design with a very naturalistic look, offering a scene of a busy kitchen filled with the many items in a typical Irish kitchen – a dresser of an Irish rural life.

Consider this picture from an early Lyric production of Dancing at Lughnasa in 2007. Ferdia Murphy the designer has created a very full a vibrant scene with the sense of prosperity and growth with the use of green grass and also a dresser filled with kitchen items.
Paul O’Mahony, the designer of the 2015 production of Dancing at Lughnasa approached the play differently, offering an unusual and interesting insight into the life of 1936 Donegal but also his interpretation of Brian Friel’s thoughts within the play.

We have seen your model box and I would imagine Paul that you are a really visual person. When you read a play do you see it in front of you?

If I’m honest I’m not sure if I do. I almost try and suppress those kind of thoughts. I make note of them but I’m always a bit cautious to jump in with initial ideas in case I’ve misunderstood the play and sometimes they are hard to let go of so I’m a bit wary of those early ideas.

Working with somebody like Annabelle – we meet and we meet and we meet before we start any visual stuff so there’s a lot of conversations first.

**Conversations about your thoughts and ideas?**

More about the play than the design. So we’re kind of analysing it, breaking it down and understanding it. And organically, that’s how I and Annabelle work, it’s different with other directors, but organically conversations just
lead to ideas in a way, and that’s the way that it works. Because some of it is as much conceptual as it is visual, and a lot of it is as practical as it is visual.

**When you say “practical” do you mean the kind of things that can actually be done on stage?**

Yeah that’s it, so you start breaking it down by basically blocking the whole play so it’s kind of quite a practical approach – where are the actors, where do they need to be, where so they come from. It’s building up the work and that leads to the ideas. It is process-based.

Now obviously visual ideas come in and they are very, very welcome but what I’m saying is that I don’t just run with those ideas. I keep them - they are little things that I go back to because they are the exciting bits, but by the time I get to making an actual design I like to have a lot of things that excite me, collected and gathered, so that I feel like I’m driven to design something. Because if I do it the other way around then I’m looking for stuff and I panic myself and think I don’t have ideas and that’s kind of scary. So I keep them in a little “jar” and when they are really bursting to be used I can then start.

**Of course that must be the way it always works –**

Well no, that’s just for me and I think it’s because I’ve had the fear of getting designer’s block and this way it takes the pressure off – I know now the ideas they will come. By not trying to have them they will come.

**Did any ideas jump out of the play at you?**

No it wasn’t that kind of play and I really had to get in to it. It’s a very subtle play and they say that the set ideas are all on the 1st page and my initial kind of fear is that, is it prescriptive? You do have to follow them but you also have to be an artist. You have to be influenced by the content of the play as much as about the stage directions and that took a while. It’s such a dense, complex play so actually in order to be influenced by it you need to try and understand it as much as you possibly can.

My initial version was; here’s a cottage, here’s a garden, here’s a room, but as soon as I did that version of it I knew it wasn’t what I wanted - and I showed it to Annabelle and I knew she wouldn’t want it either! It was a starting point but it felt overly naturalistic, a little bit twee, and it kind of felt like there was no poetic language. It wasn’t about the content or the
meaning of the play in any way and I’m always wary about that because you have to be subtle in the design too.

Can you give us some information to this very interesting 3-layered backdrop? Were you trying to expressing the complexities and layers of the play?

Well that developed as well – it started off as one thing – actually it probably started off being five or six things and it just grew into various different things and some of the ideas might have died along the way, there’s elements of all sorts of things so I can’t say this is what it’s about specifically. But the outer layer, which is the gauze layer, kind of came from early thoughts about the Memory Play. So I was looking at images of distressed and abandoned buildings and peeled off paint which made me think what is there cottage like now. So that was an early thought.

Layer 2 which is the mirror, came from the point in the play where Chrissie is looking in the cracked mirror and it’s like an omen in a sense. Also there’s the idea of these women looking in the mirror and putting make-up on, not something they do very often because of their isolated situation so the mirror was an obvious symbol in a sense. But I didn’t want to be too literal with the idea of the cracked mirror so there’s the sense of the tree and cracks and a kind of a clearing too. They are symbolic but scenic and atmospheric too I hope, when they are lit. So it can be horizon lines and it can be a sky too and it can be the hills. The hills to me have a connection with paganism and “other-worldliness” which is also there within the celebrations up in a hill or the losing of virginity in a boat. There’s all of those edgier kind of things too.

And then there’s Father Jack and his rituals from another country…

Yes and the African idea which is connected to their own paganism. So there are all of these different things going on and I don’t think you’d look at the design it say “it is definitely that” and in a way I’d hope you wouldn’t but I hope it alludes to some of those things.

In some ways it’s quite pared back. Simplicity is what we’re looking for.

Yes because you could have been much more authentic with a typical 1936 Irish kitchen with lots of bits and pieces. Was there any particular reason for doing that?
We didn’t want to be overly-sentimental and romantic about it. Yes there is romance in the play but it speaks for itself. The almost sepia colouring is because it’s back to the memory idea and it’s like he’s telling the story to begin with. He’s rooting through his own memory but it’s not a photographic memory and these characters come alive and take over the whole story.

So the text does the work for us?

Yes we have what we need in the play. It is all about those women.

Previous designs of yours have been described as “ingeniously grandiose” and “spectacular”. What word would you use to describe your set design of DAL?

I don't know! I think a critic might use the word “sparse” which isn’t particularly complimentary but what I would like to achieve is being faithful to the story.

What would your intention be as a set designer? What would you want your audience to think, feel, see, believe, and understand?

I’m saying that all these elements are part of it but what it boils down to, is that the set design works for the play. Which is why it isn’t grandiose because it doesn’t need to be – the play doesn’t demand that, and my job is to design the play and be faithful to it and to the deeper understanding of it. And I’m not saying I get the play entirely or if any of us ever will, because there’s layers of stuff and it’s not definitive anyway.

And you can only do that through your own eyes and myself and Annabelle together. And I don’t think you need all the answers anyway. The play pretty much takes care of itself. It just naturally works.
What was your emotional response when you first were approached about directing Dancing at Lughnasa?

The play comes with a huge amount of history and the weight of many previous productions. May people have seen this play – but I’m not one of them. I have never seen it. I was familiar with the piece but I read it about 20 years ago but I hadn’t read it again until I was asked to direct it.

The type of work I had done as a director was not in that vein and so when I was asked to have a read of the play I really tried to put aside all that I had heard and luckily I hadn’t seen it and all the impressions you get of something either visual or sensory or the odd line that can resonate in your head that someone has said. So when I read it I realised that I didn’t know anything about it at all so that was a relief.

And I suppose I read it thinking, what is the dramatic dynamic of the play? What is this play? What is the piece about? - and I couldn’t answer that straight away. And what sense did it make to me after a first read, what did I feel? So they were my first questions and also, what I felt I could bring to it as a director, what would I do with it? And I literally responded on first instinct to what would engage me within this play...

Do you mean if you were an audience member?

No as a director! And I was interested that everyone said how beautiful the play is. How romantic it is and such a celebration of life and yet it always struck me how grim their circumstances were, how tough, how hard, how resilient the women are, how poor they are, how isolated they are. And I thought “That’s the bed of the play”. And within that, transformations occur through song, especially through dance and even through language with Father Jack. If there are to be transformations, or rituals that bring them to “other selves” then we need to understand what they are leaving, the context and reality of their lives. And that duality that interested me.
What would your intention be for your audience?

I suppose we can look at these people lives and people are much more than that. And the play looks at the daily difficulties that people face in their lives and challenges. And in this case extreme challenges. And yet that does not make a person. I think what we see through these moments of almost, transcendence, is like a spiritual revealing of who these people are. And I don’t mean in a religious sense.

And I suppose if we can see that and the meaning of expression and that release for these women and that being the thing that Michael celebrates right now in the present. That life. As supposed to it being a reflective look at the past – if it can come alive, I would be excited.

You are working with Liz Roche as a choreographer and I was wondering has she been looking at the rhythm in the play has her work affected the overall physicality of the play?

Liz has been great as she has been in rehearsal and she’s not just working on the dance pieces she is also seeing all the actors and their physicality and working off that in terms of who these characters are and how they bring movement to their lives. I love working with Liz and we are similar in what we are looking for.

I would say Liz is quite holistic and I think good choreographers are and there is an investment that the dance piece isn’t just plonked in there that it lives within the piece. So hopefully that is what we will achieve.
What do you find most interesting about your role as Michael Evans?

There’s a lot of celebratory elements involved in this role. This is my 2\textsuperscript{nd} time playing Michael and I’ve seen it done before where the character has treated it almost as some kind of therapy session.

We’ve been talking a lot about memory and trying to work out what memory is. So for example, you and I could go off and have a great day out and if someone interviewed us we may have 2 slightly different stories about what happened.

And the idea of how memory sculpts us, and how we distil memory to give us what we need. I remember years ago one morning sitting on Rosnowlagh beach in Donegal watching the sun come up. It was before I started college and I had my whole life in front of me. However I didn’t realise until only 10 years ago that I was looking out into the West so I couldn’t have been watching the sun come up! The sun was rising behind me! But the memory that I had distilled was a completely different from what actually happened!

But Michael is incredibly eloquent, and incredibly honest and hopefully he’ll have an assurance about him, and a courage to go back and visit things that are painful to him.

I’ve seen Michael portrayed as run down, unshaven, and sometimes close to being an alcoholic perhaps and others have played him very stiff and very
formal. Whereas we’re trying to find someone that, in spite of all the obstacles put in front of him such in the incredibly oppressive society it was at that time, the gifts he was given by his mother and the resolve and resources he had within himself, has come out a lot more balanced an individual that what could be expected. But that’s just an interpretation too.

**That’s the lovely thing about Friel’s writing, is that nothing is definitive....**

Yes, and I could do another production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* next year and it could be entirely different. It’s so ambiguous and it depends on what the director wants and what you think yourself as an actor. This time it’s a lot less emotional. The emotion is still there but it’s more about the over-riding arc, and the objective of my character which is wanting to go through these memories and try and work out what exactly happened. Because he has been defined by the time and even at 7 years of age things were changing too quickly, so Michael as a young boy is coming to an awakening himself.

That’s one of the reasons why he visits this memory again but also of that final memory – when he talks about the dancing at the end, is he still seeing his mother and father dancing as they do at the end of Act One? Does he see it as a kind of ceremony as they never had a formal marriage?

**And do you think this is what he wants to see – like you wanting to see the sun rising in the West?**

Yes absolutely that’s it! Friel talks about it as well in *Philadelphia Here I Come* and calls it the “distillation of memory” but by distilling memory you might embellish it – you might not be entirely true to what factually happened. But what memories are, are the essence of what happens in the past. And Friel is exploring this and explores it beautifully.

**What time period are you setting Michael’s recollections?**

In the 1970’s. And he’s in his early 40s talking and dealing with very rural Irish issues and is being very open about them. He is very progressive because I grew up in the 70’s and there weren’t many men talking like Michael Evans.

And then the other thing is, how do you approach it as an actor? – who are you talking to is the big question always....
I love the device that Friel has chosen is to anchor the play with this narrator and there are so many choices you have in how to play him. For example how do you talk when you are playing the young Michael?

Friel expressly says in the stage directions that he uses his own narrator’s voice and not a childlike voice. He doesn’t want Michael to play a young boy he want him to have the memory of being the young boy. And this is in the language of the young boy and not in the tone of a young boy. I think he does this because he never wants Michael to leave the present. We as an audience are with him in real time instead of him disappearing into a play of his own, and the hard part then is getting the audience to engage with the young boy who isn’t physically there.

Where has Annabelle the director placed you when, for example, Aunt Maggie is talking to the young boy when he is making his kites?

Well it’s a movable feast at the minute – we’re trying loads of different things. The first time we had Michael kneeling down beside Maggie and he was also addressing the young boy. Friel was very clear that Michael had his own space DSL with his own light and this is something we are playing with. What Annabelle is keen on exploring is that Michael doesn’t leave the stage at all, and then we are looking at why Friel has said he comes on and off. If he is onstage all the time the only fear is pulling focus. The audience will be looking at Michael to see how he is reacting to what is happening in the other scenes. The nice thing is that we can go back to the original stage directions but we’re just playing around with it at the minute. And I do think that the more present Michael is, the more it keeps the audience in the memory of what is happening, rather than in the scene.

You have the rather long monologues. As an actor what techniques do you have for learning lines? Do you for example look in the mirror and repeat them back to yourself or do you write out your lines from memory?

Some people record their lines and listen to them over and over. I try not to learn any lines until I’ve had at least one session with the director – so the director can talk about what he or she is looking for and this then informs your thoughts. For example, when Michael talks about Agnes and Rose going to London – my intuition at first was that this is a very sad time so is this the first time he has spoken about this? Is he exploring this emotionally for the first time as well as intellectually? But instead we have chosen that
he is at peace with what has happened rather than it being an emotional rollercoaster. And that comes from talking to the director and finding out how they want to serve the play and then you also serving it as best you can. So you work out what the thought is behind the line and that helps with your learning of it.

**And it’s more difficult for you because you don’t have anyone to bounce off like the others do…**

Aye it can be a lonely place. And when I first played Michael Evans I felt very vulnerable and this informed my more emotional playing of the character then. You can approach it in different ways – who am I talking to? Am I in a lecture room of people or am I talking to people who knew these women? A classic response is, am I talking to God? And we haven’t really defined that yet and that’s ok so right now I think he is on a stage and he is talking to an audience who have come to see this story. So all you want is to give yourself a focus as an actor.

The great thing about playing Michael is that you have to reach everyone and clarity is vital on stage. You can have all the intentions and emotions and drive, but if you are tearing at it at 200 miles an hour that’s not going to help. So there’s an awful lot of discipline involved as well.

**Do you mean in terms of your vocal delivery?**

Yes your articulation.

**And how do you prepare as an actor? What vocal warm-ups do you do?**

Oh loads! What I’d do for Michael for example will be to find a space by myself and go over every line and really over-exaggerate every word and in doing so I’m really working the muscles in my mouth. When I started in Trinity years ago you’d do all these scenes and you’d be full of beans and full of gusto and when you’d finish the director would say “That was great Charlie but what on earth were you saying?”

And I keep going back to the last time I played Michael. We rehearsed in this huge hall and the director would ask me to go to the far end of the hall and say my lines and tell me they wanted to hear every word. And this really helped. And you know, there’s no point in doing all that work if no-one can hear you.

**Good advice for a student who is rehearsing this play?**
Yes and it’s not about shouting, it’s about articulation. And Friel is so clever about breathing. And his punctuation is vital.

**A bit like Shakespeare?**

Yes and there is not a comma or a dash in there that he doesn’t know exactly why it is there. So even technically – find a sentence that doesn’t have much punctuation in it and see if you can deliver it without taking a breath, whilst still maintaining the meaning of the line.

We’ve looked at sentences that begin with a lot of consonants short clipped words and then there are other lines that are full of vowel sounds and you can start hearing a music.

**Yes there is a musicality in the text....**

And it helps you and informs you and you aren’t digging around trying to manufacture something. It’s all in there. And I’ve seen actors play this part and they are weeping from the very first line. And I got really angry because they are not serving the play, they are serving themselves. And yes it’s like Shakespeare because the more you give to the play the more it rewards you.

In this play Friel introduces a debate and has us talking and he doesn’t fall down on one side or the other. And he does it beautifully

**Why do you think that you, Charlie Bonner, has been cast twice as Michael Evans?**

Well I’m of the age that Michael is (and wish I was 10 years younger!) and I, like Michael, have been away from home for a long time. I’ve decided that like me, he went and lived in Dublin and I also think that. He has been away for a long time and we think he might be a writer in History or English and perhaps could be a college professor perhaps.

**The famous iconic dance we see – do you think this is the first time the women have ever behaved in this way?**

I think this is the first time. There is such a need to express, an innate savagery that has been building inside them for years..."and dancing screaming like excited school girls.....maybe I witnessed Marconi’s voodoo derange those kind sensible women and transform them into shrieking strangers...” there’s no rules in this dance. There’s anger, frustration and joy as well......
Acting

In conversation with....

Mary Murray (Rose Mundy)

Tuesday 28th July 2015

Give us a bit of background to your character Rose Mundy form someone who has never seen DAL before

I play Rose Mundy who is 32 years of age and she is in the family of the Mundy sisters, there are 5 girls in total and she is the second youngest. She has a learning disability and she tends to say things she shouldn’t really say, in this world, this environment, where everything revolves around religion and keeping things together with society and she has a little bit more freedom than her other sisters and she gets away with doing and saying certain things because she just doesn’t know.

And so she’s minded a lot by her older sister Agnes who she helps knit gloves – that how they make some pocket money. She gets on with Agnes and likes to tell her some of her personal stories and although Agnes doesn’t quite agree with them she usually has to say things in a very nice, gentle way. At this stage I think Rose could go off the handle at any point but, you know, this is early days rehearsal-wise, we’ve just started week two and from a first read that’s what it reads like, but you know, the more you get in to the detail the more intricate the inter-personal relationships the more you question well is she flying off the handle? Does that come from somewhere else? Also from a first read it looks like there are certain moments where Rose gets very upset and becomes very withdrawn as well. When certain people like Kate, the head of the family, tends to say things to put Rose down and she gets a bit upset about these things but she finds her way back out of it again. It’s a very interesting situation to watch, to explore.

It’s really interesting you’ve used the phrase “learning disability” as this is a more modern phrasing and she may have been called “slow” in earlier times. Are you perhaps modelling Rose on someone?
No at this very early stage in the game I’m still trying to work out what her issues are and where did they come from. Because you know everybody was labelled the same and these days we know that mental illness has so many categories. You know I thought to myself, is she autistic? slightly on the spectrum? Are there other things she’s dealing with? So yeah you know you have to go through the play and think she doesn’t seem like she’s autistic because she doesn’t follow that pattern and we haven’t been told that she’s had some kind of traumatic event that has forced her into this situation. But the thing is I suppose, in those days people just did label people as slow and that was it. And I’m wondering - I’m trying to find certain qualities in her to decide exactly where her issues have come from, because just saying a person is slow- you know it doesn’t say she has for example Down ’s syndrome or anything, and then you could go and ask questions about that. But just to say someone is slow - I know plenty of slow people! I can one of those myself and can be the leader of the slow on occasion!
One of the most interesting things I find about Rose is that, out of the 5 sisters, only she and Chrissie seem to have any evidence of romance.

Yeah we are discovering as we go along that there is a want for romance and love from all of the women.

Maggie mentions it frequently!

Yeah Maggie would love a man! A bald fat man would do! And then we’ve got Agnes, who looks like she is kind of pining for Gerry as well but wouldn’t really do anything about it. Then we’ve got Kate who my character Rose goes on and on about her going in Austin Morgan’s (quotes) “I know why you went into Morgan’s!” and she tries to dismiss that but it’s been put out there on the table. It has been mentioned it and Kate is dismissing and there has to be a real reason for that. And Chrissie, very obviously has had her love story but, unfortunately sign of the times, she’s in a situation where she can’t just go off and get married-

Or possibly find someone new? Is she tainted do you think?

Yeah she’s tainted. She’s very tainted. They live in the back hills there and to a degree most of them tend not to go out. Kate is the one that goes out does the shopping and the only other information from the outside world seems to come from Rose. So Rose mentions things like the cinema and meeting Danny Bradley and going off on his boat and knowing about the boy that was burned up in the hills and knowing why Kate is going in to Austin Morgan’s. This is information that Rose seems to have picked up from the outside world. The others don’t seem to mention detail from beyond the hills. I think to the same degree, whatever information she’s getting from this Danny Bradley guy she’s taking it as gospel as well. So the question is, how often does she see this Danny Bradley? Because we’re in August now, Lughnasa time, and she mentions this medal that Danny Bradley gave her on Christmas Day. Well that’s a long time ago, 8 months ago so how often is she meeting him?

Do you think she is making it up?

No I don’t thinks she’s making it up because she has information from the outside world that isn’t fed to her from the other sisters. So I think she is getting that from somebody in particular. I don’t know how many people she would get to chat to. I think if she was talking to a lot of people she would mention them because she is very direct.
We’ve been sitting here knitting this afternoon and it’s been so interesting because it seems you have discovered so much about your character already - you even know how she knits! Do you as an actress do you come from that organic place where you allow the script to do the work or do you use a Stanislavskian “What if” approach to learn more about your character? Like what would Rose do in a particular situation?

I think it’s a mixture of everything. You read the material, first time round, it’s a one dimensional picture, and the more you start to live in the world and the more you associate with the certain characters you ask questions and you ask “why would I pick up the wool like this?” and you ask “where would I sit?” and a lots of things start to happen organically. When you cast things well a lot of the work is done. I imagine they have cast this well because when I look at the actors they seem to be able to fall into the roles. I mean Catherine Cusack there for example, who is playing Agnes, is a wonderful actress and it’s such a joy to watch her because she is very different from me. Her role in this is to be the best knitter in Ballybeg and from her personality you can tell she is a perfectionist and she needs to get the knitting right. And that is who Agnes is too. Whereas I am very much a go-with-the-flow kind of person and let things happen organically and definitely I think Rose is too. I don’t think Rose worries too much. She ends up saying the wrong things and most times she doesn’t get into too much trouble because of her status I suppose.

**What do you mean by the kind of things she gets away with?**

For example she mentions to Kate about Austin Morgan and she says “It is, it is,” and she keeps it up - nobody else in the family would dare do something like that with Kate. At one point Agnes says “We’re not in school now don’t treat us like school children” and that’s when she (Kate) gets really angry and up until that point no one speaks back.

And Maggie has a wonderful way of turning everything into fun and making a joke out of stuff so she has a way to divert the attention.

They’re chained to this house but they kind of know it. They just need to find easy ways to say things to Rose, because I think at this point, and I could be totally wrong, and you might talk to me in two weeks and I might be in a different place, but I think Rose could just run away – like a child. It’s a temper I think, that she can’t nuance, and everything is just black and white to her I think.
I’m still grappling with the issue with the rooster. She has this pet rooster and it dies and it’s like there is no reason to be here anymore. It feels, in that moment for Rose, that it’s a time in her life when she needs to move on. She’s just come back very recently from being out with Danny Bradley guy and maybe she had sex with him –

**Because Brian Friel says she is dressed very much like a woman -**

Yeah, and she’s not unlike any pretty woman that’s dressed up and it’s all very ordinary and she’s hungry. And she dips her hands into two big buckets of bilberries and eats them and rubs her hands on her dress and it’s a hunger. And is it the hunger after having sex or is it just her not thinking too much about things and getting on with the next thing? Or has she reached a moment or pinnacle in her life where she has actually changed to womanhood which most of the others in a way haven’t really done as they don’t have romantic relationships?

But it feels that in that moment it’s a new time in her life and so when the rooster is dead, it’s just dead. She’s not grief-stricken or anything.

She’s goes off and sits on a swing and what is she thinking at that point? And at that moment have Agnes and Rose somehow hatched a plan to leave or does it come to fruition soon after? It’s all stuff to explore and I don’t have answers I only have questions!

**I can imagine from talking to you Mary, that as an actor you are always going to be asking questions? That’s there’s never any final answers and that things constantly evolve?**

Yeah definitely I don’t think there’s ever any final answers. For me things have to be organic as well, as in, if you ask me to move a chair then there’s going to be a whole different world to that chair. Annabelle said “maybe she’ll sit on the bench” and before I know it there’s 50 different ways to sit on a bench. But I was over doing it because I explore things physically as I go and I don’t think too much about it and I think “oh that’s interesting that I’m under the chair or that’s interesting I have only 1 welly on!” Lots of times I have to pull back! But I have to play like a child to see where things go you know?
Dancing at Lughnasa runs at the Lyric Theatre until Sunday 27th September 2015.