

*Dancing in translation: Irina Brook's mise en scène of 'Danser à Lughnasa', Jean-Marie Besset's translation of Brian Friel's 'Dancing at Lughnasa'*

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**Dancing in translation: Irina Brook's *mise en scène* of *Danser à Lughnasa*,  
Jean-Marie Besset's translation of Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa***

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**Keywords:** Brian Friel, Irina Brook, cross-cultural theatre, translation, cosmopolitanism.

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**Abstract**

This essay contributes to debates about theatre and cross-cultural encounter through an analysis of Irina Brook's 1999 Swiss / French co-production of Irish playwright Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*, in a French translation by Jean-Marie Besset. While the translation and Brook's *mise en scène* clearly identified the source text and culture as Irish, they avoided cultural stereotypes, and rendered the play accessible to francophone audiences without entirely assimilating it to a specific Swiss or French cultural context. Drawing on discourses of theatre translation, and concepts of cosmopolitanism and conviviality, the essay focuses on the potential of such textual and theatrical translation to acknowledge specific cultural traces but also to estrange the familiar perceptions and boundaries of both the source and target cultures, offering modes of interconnection across diverse cultural affiliations.

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What translation can do most powerfully ... is to promote hybridity, a hybrid text that simultaneously moves between and across different histories and geographies, locating and uprooting the historical and cultural imagination of the spectator. (Johnson 2011: 19)

Brian Friel's play *Translations* (1980) dramatizes the political dimensions of translation by charting the historical displacement of a minority language / culture (Irish Gaelic) by a more powerful, imperial nation (Britain). Friel has also engaged directly with the cross-cultural negotiations involved in translation from a 'source' to a 'target' culture through his versions of texts by Chekhov, Ibsen and Turgenev (Friel 1987, 1992, 1998, 2008a, 2008b). Friel's work therefore offers fertile ground for investigating issues of translation, cultural identities and theatre. However, when the object of analysis is a foreign production of a Friel play in translation, diverse layers of linguistic, theatrical and cultural translation need to be taken into account, opening up a complex politics of representation: how are different cultural contexts and modes of authorship negotiated, are cultural stereotypes affirmed or resisted, is the source text assimilated into the target culture or does the translation foreground dislocations and cross-cultural encounters?<sup>1</sup> Irish theatre research is establishing a productive dialogue with the expanding discipline of theatre and translation studies.<sup>2</sup>

However, while there has been some critical discussion of translations of Friel's texts, and of Friel's own translations,<sup>3</sup> there is scope for more critical exploration of Friel's work in the context of foreign language productions.

Drawing on discourses of theatre translation, and concepts of cosmopolitanism and conviviality, I will analyze Irina Brook's 1999 Swiss / French co-production of one of Brian Friel's best known plays, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, set in Donegal, Ireland, in the 1930s, in a French translation by Jean-Marie Besset. While the translation and Brook's *mise en scène* clearly identified the source text and culture as Irish, they avoided cultural stereotypes, and rendered the play accessible to francophone audiences without entirely assimilating it to a specific Swiss or French cultural context. The essay focuses on the potential of such textual and theatrical translation to acknowledge specific cultural traces but also to estrange the familiar perceptions and boundaries of both the source and target cultures, offering modes of interconnection across diverse cultural affiliations.

### **Performing Translation / Translating Performance**

Translation theorists emphasize that the process of translation entails not only the communication of foreign texts to their target audiences, but, as Sirkku Aaltonen notes, the mediation of 'a variety of codes - the linguistic and the socio-historical as well as the cultural and theatrical - that govern their discourse and give it its specificity'. In translation 'these codes are interpreted and re-directed to express the codes of the target society...' (Aaltonen 2000: 2). Indeed, as Lawrence Venuti has argued, the process of translation can render invisible both the labour of the

translator and the alterity of the source text and culture. Therefore, although he recognizes that: ‘the very function of translating is assimilation, the inscription of a foreign text with domestic intelligibilities and interests’, he is interested in translation strategies that retain alienating or, in Antoine Berman’s term, ‘foreignizing’ elements, which do ‘not so much prevent the assimilation of the foreign text as aim to signify the autonomous existence of that text behind (yet by means of) the assimilative process of the translation’. Strategies which foreground the act of translation can reveal the ‘assymmetrical relations in any translation project’ (Venuti 1998: 11). Friel’s own versions of Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* and *Uncle Vanya*, or Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler*, for example, while acknowledging the location and authorship of the source text, hibernicize the dialogue in order to counter the ‘very strong English cadences and rhythms’ (Murray 1999: 84) of existing Anglophone translations and make them speak more directly to Irish actors and audiences.<sup>4</sup> By appropriating global classic texts of modern European theatre, the indigenous repertoire is expanded and given additional cultural value. In terms of being translated, however, Friel’s status is ambiguous: on the one hand, he is from a minority (Irish) culture, but, on the other hand, his texts are written in English, the ‘most translated language in the world’ (Venuti 1998: 160), and the Irish literary dramatic tradition of Yeats, Synge or Beckett has a high cultural value. Therefore, it is not surprising that, rather than naturalizing the text for French audiences through replacing Irish names or cultural references with French ones, Jean-Marie Besset’s translation of Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa* is treated with what Aaltonen terms ‘reverence’ (Aaltonen 2000: 8): it is translated in full, and the Irish names and

locations are retained, acknowledging the status of the text as a translation. Indeed, as will be explored below, the French text was produced in the context of a Franco-Irish programme to promote Irish culture.

However, I'm not concerned here with the textual translation of Friel's play in isolation, but with what Patrice Pavis terms 'the much broader "translation" that is the *mise en scène*' (Pavis 1992: 136), which places the translated, spoken text in the context of the multiple other languages of the stage and the contexts of production and performance. I will consider the source text and cultural contexts of Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*, and will then shift to an analysis of the hybrid translation and production contexts of *Danser à Lughnasa*. I'm interested in how each of these contexts and discourses interact to provide a model of performance which, as Johnston suggests, 'simultaneously moves between and across different histories and geographies, locating and uprooting the historical and cultural imagination of the spectator'.

### **Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*: textual interpretation and production contexts**

Brian Friel's plays hold a central place in the Irish dramatic tradition, defined by Nicholas Grene as 'Irish drama which is self-consciously concerned with the representation of Ireland as its main subject' (Grene 1999: 1). This tradition 'has created an internal structure for Irish drama with inbuilt interpretative modes' (Grene 1999: 49), where each play comments not only on the state of the nation, but on previous 'misrepresentations', whether through external stereotypes of Irishness,



or internal myths of national or cultural identity and history. The tradition is therefore janus-faced: it interprets the nation for its internal audiences but also mediates Ireland for a global audience: 'Ireland is always being more or less self-consciously staged for somebody's benefit' (Greene 1999: 49). *Dancing at Lughnasa* conforms to this model: on the one hand, it presents globally recognisable 'citations of signs of Irishness' which include, according to Clare Wallace (discussing a Czech production of Marina Carr's *The Mai*), music, dancing, and 'pre-industrial rurality' (Wallace 2003: 44). The Lughnasa festival referred to in the title of Friel's play evokes the pagan harvest rituals, named after the Celtic god Lugh, which involved feasting (especially the eating of bilberries), the lighting of bonfires on high places, and dancing / ritual re-enactments in praise of Lugh (see O'Neill 1962). On the other hand, the play self-consciously frames the creation of nostalgic images of Irishness and of the past: when the narrator Michael looks back on the summer of 1936, he overtly warns the audience that the picture he is portraying: 'owes nothing to fact' (Friel 1990: 71). The play abounds with references to distorting mirrors and photographs and things imagined or not seen, subtly deconstructing the nostalgia it seems to indulge in, and questioning how images or narratives of the past are constructed.

Moreover, the play reminds its audiences of the social and sexual conservatism of 1930s Ireland, undercutting any idealized 'misrepresentation' of an Irish rural past. *Dancing at Lughnasa* is set, like most of Friel's plays, in the environs of the fictional small town of Ballybeg in County Donegal, Ireland. During the summer of 1936, the homestead of the five Mundy sisters is visited by their

uncle Jack, returned from missionary service in Uganda, and by Gerry Evans, the Welsh father of Michael, Christina Mundy's illegitimate child. Gerry is about to enlist in one of the International Brigades to resist Franco in the Spanish civil war. These characters place Ballybeg in a shifting network of global powers and resistances, and also underline the precarious, marginalised position of the Mundy household: the sisters have managed to compensate for the social and religious disgrace of Christina's illegitimate child by the prestige of the eldest sister Kate's position as a schoolteacher and Jack's status as a missionary priest within the Catholic Church. However, this fragile balance is shattered by the end of the play. The action is framed through the narration of the adult Michael, who informs the readers / audience that Kate will lose her job due to the Church's censure of Jack's conversion to Ugandan native religious practices, and a knitting factory will remove the livelihood of sisters Agnes and Rose, who leave for London and become destitute. The pagan forces which seem to possess the sisters when they dance, while not romanticised in the play (the potential violence of such abandon is acknowledged when a boy is injured in one of the bonfire rituals), are contrasted with the repressive sexual regime of the Catholic Church and its institutional power within Ireland and in overseas missions such as in Uganda. *Dancing at Lughnasa* articulates the lack of social and economic agency and mobility available to Irish women such as the Mundy sisters on the eve of Ireland's 1937 Constitution which endorsed contemporary Catholic doctrine on the primary domestic role of women as wives and mothers. The play therefore critiques the inequalities and conservatism of post-independence Ireland, and offers an antidote to nostalgic and insular images of

Irish history. Productions of the play, whether Irish or international, have negotiated these representational tropes and frameworks in different ways.

Patrick Lonergan has argued that the 1990 premiere of *Dancing at Lughnasa* at the Abbey Theatre Dublin commented not only on the conservative culture of 1930s Ireland but also on the pre-Celtic Tiger Ireland of the late 1980s when emigration, unemployment and lack of female equality were all continuing problems (Lonergan 2009: 31-55). Helen Lojek agrees that: ‘the play takes the pulse of the 1930s but also of the 1980s by recognising the unfinished revolution in the lives of Irish women’ (Lojek 2006: 78). The play therefore addressed the Irish socio-political status quo in 1990 with some urgency. However, Lonergan suggests that the international success of the play and of Patrick Mason’s premiere production, which toured internationally in various incarnations for several years<sup>5</sup> and was revived in 1999, reinforced the nostalgic rather than the critical elements of the play. Joe Vanek’s visually stunning design featured a steep field of golden wheat rising behind the partial frame of the kitchen and the forestage. Enrica Cerquoni argues: ‘Because of its vast popular and critical acclaim, this set design has become iconic of the theatrical imagery of the play’ (Cerquoni 2007: 185). Although the unnatural angle of the field and its containment within the stage frame had an unsettling visual impact, emphasizing the constructed and constrained nature of this pastoral vision, Lonergan argues that it is the golden aura of the field and the lighting that has come to define Mason’s production: ‘the overall atmosphere created was of warmth and perpetual sunshine’ (Lonergan 2009: 47).

Enrica Cerquoni suggests that Joe Dowling's 2004 Dublin Gate Theatre production captured more acutely the play's structure of perceptual layers through the superimposition of a frame within the proscenium frame of the Gate Theatre: 'it is as if the spectators are invited to access the play's complex world through a series of multiplying frames which, one after the other, undermine the effect of one unitary perspective' (Cerquoni 2007: 188). Indeed, Cerquoni emphasizes the destabilizing impact of focusing on diverse theatrical productions of the play, rather than on the apparently more stable authorial text or canonical premiere production: 'With each production, the scenic transposition seeks to reinvent Irish theatrical locations which, less burdened by national traditions and inherited visual formats, are characterized by inclusiveness, open-endedness, non-linearity and multi-dimensionality' (Cerquoni 2007: 190). This article seeks to pursue Cerquoni's reflections by examining a production that transposed *Dancing at Lughnasa* into the French language and a culturally hybrid production context.

### **Friel in French**

Although the Friel Papers in the archives of the Irish National Library, Dublin, show some French interest in *Philadelphia Here I Come* in the 1960s,<sup>6</sup> the major scholar of Friel's work in France, Martine Pelletier, notes that French translations of Friel's work only began to be published in the 1980s, with *Lovers*, *Faith Healer* and *Translations* (Pelletier 1997: 14-15).<sup>7</sup> *Danser à Lughnasa*, Jean-Marie Besset's translation of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, was first published by Éditions Théâtrales, Paris, in 1996, as part of *l'Imaginaire irlandais*, a festival of contemporary Irish art

and culture held during 1996 in Paris and other French towns, including Caen, Dijon, Lille and Rennes. The *Imaginaire irlandais* festival was inaugurated following a meeting between Mary Robinson, then President of Ireland and the late President Mitterand in the course of the former's State visit to France in May 1992, so the context was specifically that of cross-cultural exchange and the promotion of Irish culture in France.<sup>8</sup> The textual translation of *Dancing at Lughnasa* published in 1996 therefore made the play available to a French audience who, as Pelletier argued, were not particularly familiar with Friel at that time (Pelletier 1997: 14).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Irina Brook's French premiere in 1999 may have contributed to public awareness of Friel's theatre in France: since 2000, there have been several high profile productions of his plays.<sup>10</sup>

Jean-Marie Besset's translation combines a somewhat literary tone with colloquial words and phrases: the use of 'tatie' for aunt instead of 'tante', for example (Friel 1996: 22). Besset described this as remembering 'the more rural rhythms and ways to talk of my grand-parents' families in Southwest France (between Albi, Limoux and Quillan -pays de Sault- the Aude Valley) to try to find an equivalent flavor to Friel's *Eire*'.<sup>11</sup> This strategy conveys information about the play's setting 'outside' Ballybeg to its target audiences who might not be familiar with the geography and the Irish cultural and political resonances of Donegal, by finding a Francophone version of a colloquial voice and rhythm, while retaining the Donegal location. The Irish names and locations maintain a 'foreignizing' tension with the French dialogue. This article will explore further that 'foreignizing' effect in Brook's production, and the 'deterritorializing' of Irishness through the

translation process: ‘At the heart of translation, of every act or event that is generated by a translator, there is a double consciousness, a decentredness or lack of fixity that prompts, for example, Paul Ricoeur to talk about the special “aterritoriality” in which the act of translating takes place’ (Johnston 2011: 12). Irina Brook’s production, I will argue, subdued Besset’s French local idioms, regularizing and simplifying the dialogue, while retaining Irish references in the *mise en scène* as well as in the text, in order to extend the rural associations of the play. Her production also foregrounded the location of the play primarily in the metatheatrical space of the stage.

### **Irina Brook: between cultures**

The 1999 production of *Danser à Lughnasa* incorporated a cast and creative team particularly characterized by diverse cultural experiences, contexts and identities. Irina Brook is the daughter of director Peter Brook and actress Natasha Parry. Based in Paris at the Bouffes du nord theatre since 1974, British-born Peter Brook is renowned for making theatre from Asian and African sources with a mixed ethnic cast, such as his version of *The Mahabharata* (1985) or *Tierno Bokar* (2005), in search of a theatre which can communicate across cultures and languages.<sup>12</sup> Though Irina Brook initially followed her mother into acting, training at the Stella Adler School in New York, and working as an actress in the United States, Paris and London, she turned to directing in 1996.<sup>13</sup> She has directed theatre and opera in Europe and America, working with new texts and versions of classic plays, including Shakespeare. Her first *mise en scène* was *A Beast on the Moon* (by

Armenian-American author, Richard Kalinoski) in which a photographer who escaped the Armenian genocide by the Turks in 1915 brings a young Armenian mail order bride to the United States to join him in Milwaukee in the 1920s.<sup>14</sup> After *A Beast on the Moon*, Brook directed *Mrs Klein* by Nicholas Wright (about the psychoanalyst, Melanie Klein) at the Palace theatre, Watford, near London, in 1997. Later that year, she directed a multicultural production of Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* also at the Palace Theatre Watford. This was produced in a French translation at the Avignon Festival in 1998, by Ariane Mnouchkine's Théâtre du Soleil, and, in the same year, a French translation of Kalinoski's play, *La Bête sur la Lune*, played at the Théâtre Vidy-Lausanne in Switzerland with the same actors from the English language production (like herself, many of the actors Brook has worked with are bi- or multi-lingual) and then at MC93 Bobigny, Paris. The following year *Danser à Lughnasa* was a co-production between Vidy-Lausanne and MC93 Bobigny.<sup>15</sup> An analysis of the production of *Danser à Lughnasa*<sup>16</sup> therefore takes place at the intersection of diverse cultural and theatrical infrastructures and interconnections and across the literary authorship of Friel the playwright and the developing directorial practice of Irina Brook, herself continually moving between linguistic, cultural and theatrical contexts:

A peripatetic childhood, and a constant engagement with other cultures has installed in Irina Brook the belief that cosmopolitan exchange is the richest foundation for any production. This international outlook is reflected in the multi-racial casting of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, where the five sisters are

played by Syrian, Armenian, Jewish, French and Belgian actresses. (Walton Masters 1999: 3-4)

The term 'cosmopolitanism' has provoked critical debate in recent years: on the one hand it evokes a privileged mobility across different cultural contexts, and, on the other, a more egalitarian concept of respecting cultural difference, specificity and differentials of access to economic and cultural capital and authority, while acknowledging the intersections across cultures characteristic of the contemporary globalized world<sup>17</sup>. Irina Brook inhabits a range of this spectrum: on the one hand she has access to significant theatrical institutions in France and internationally (*Danser à Lughnasa* toured to the Toyko International Festival in 1999, along with Peter Brook's production of *The Man Who*). On the other, her early productions focus on the interchange between specific, though layered cultural identities. In particular, the texts of *A Beast on the Moon* and *Dancing at Lughnasa* share a tension between a precise historical moment and geographical location on the one hand, and, on the other, a sense of displacement and questioning of essentialized cultural identities: through the mixed Irish-Welsh parentage of the narrator Michael and the global networks that traverse the local setting of Ballybeg in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, and the ultimate adoption of a local American child in *A Beast on the Moon*, when the couple are unable to produce children to replace the husband's missing family killed in the Armenian massacre. Irina Brook's productions of these plays combined a detailed emphasis on interpersonal relationships and finely observed psychological performances, with a stripped, minimalist set, and a highly



physical approach to performance (Féral 2007: 95). In other words, the productions respected the specific cultural markers of the source texts, but also emphasized the meta-theatrical construction of the performance as embodied through an ensemble cast who crossed various cultural identities and boundaries. In fact, the review quoted above neglects the multi-layered cultural identities of Brook's actors such as the Germano-Syrian background of French actress, Corinne Jaber.

Contributing to the debate about cosmopolitanism, Paul Gilroy prefers the term 'conviviality' in order to articulate 'new networks of interconnectedness and solidarity that could resonate across boundaries' (Gilroy 2005: 5). In particular, for Gilroy, the term conviviality resists national and unitary definitions of identity: 'The radical openness that brings conviviality alive makes a nonsense of closed, fixed and reified identity and turns attention toward the always unpredictable mechanisms of identification' (Gilroy 2005: xv). He therefore recommends the development of a critical distance, an 'estrangement' from the norms and boundaries of one's own culture, in order to privilege 'other, more open affiliations' (Gilroy 2005: 68). Translation of a source text to a target audience is one process through which such a critical distance towards the habits and conventions of both the source and target cultures may be effected. Indeed, theatre production and co-production in the contemporary globalized world question any unitary target culture. Rather, as Erika Fischer-Lichte has argued, casts, production and design team and director may include many cultural and theatrical traditions, and tour to diverse audiences (Fischer-Lichte 2010). I'm arguing that Brook's *Danser à Lughnasa* produced an identifiable yet also slightly estranged performance of Irishness through the

‘interweaving’ (Fischer-Lichte 2010: 294) of the cultural specificity of the source text with a cosmopolitan rehearsal, performance and production context.

Commentators on Brook’s approach as a director note her emphasis on creating an ensemble for the duration of the production.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, she has spoken about this theatrical collectivity as a model of a diverse, non-hierarchical community, however provisional (Féral 2007: 96).

In an interview for *La Terrasse*, a monthly Parisian arts magazine, Irina Brook explains that Corinne Jaber, who played the role of the bride Seta in *The Beast on the Moon*, gave *Danser à Lughnasa* to Brook several years before.<sup>19</sup> They organised a reading at Peter Brook’s theatre, the Bouffes du Nord, and this led to a full production. The play evidently appealed to Brook because of its potential for a female ensemble: all of her productions around this time involved significant and complex roles for women, something Brook has sought throughout her career (Féral 2007: 104). Her programme note stressed the transcultural themes of the play by citing a Hindu tale, where the greatest marvel of the world is that though we are surrounded by death, we live as if we were immortal, underlining the play’s focus on the fragility of the Mundy sisters’ world which is about to be torn apart. This suggests a ‘universalizing’ approach to the play. However, as I will explore below, the Irish cultural context of the play was fully acknowledged, while avoiding stereotypical ‘folkloric or stage-Irish aspect(s)’ (Walton Masters 1999: 4). Rather than attempting to analyze the play from the point of view of its several target audiences and cultures, in the remainder of this article, I will consider how the production both affirmed and unsettled the ‘indicators of Irishness’ associated with

the international success of the play.

### ***Danser à Lughnasa: Dislocating Ireland***

Irina Brook's production of *Danser à Lughnasa* presented costume and stage properties that evoked rural Ireland in the 1930s.<sup>20</sup> In preparation for the production, several members of the team, including the designer, Roswitha Gerlitz, and actors Laura Benson<sup>21</sup> and Josiane Stoleru visited Donegal. Gerlitz and her assistant drove through the countryside, taking photos, and picked up original objects for the set and costume from local antique shops.<sup>22</sup> These objects, experiences and photos informed the set and costume design. Items of furniture included stools, benches, a kitchen dresser with period mugs and plates, a small stove with kettle and teapot, chairs, and a kitchen table stage centre. The women wore aprons, dresses and boots that looked historically accurate and captured the sense of rural Irish women on a small working cottage farm. Materials were dipped in tea to give an authentic 1930s look.

Colin Graham has emphasized that 'authenticity' is a 'marketable sign of value' that has become associated with the global branding of Irish cultural products or tourism (Graham 2001: 132). While Brook's production used signifiers of 'authentic' 1930s Irishness, these were countered by an emphasis on the energy of female performance that was not culturally specific, and a self-conscious theatricality. This is evident in the shift of publicity materials from Lausanne to Paris. For the Lausanne programme, an image of an Irish cottage and stone wall in sepia tones was used, keying into somewhat nostalgic, pre-industrial and rural images of Irishness, as captured in films like *The Quiet Man* (John Ford 1952).

However, the Bobigny programme focused on the figure of Maggie, screaming at the beginning of the dance sequence. Her apron and the sepia-like tone suggest a rural past, but Irishness is not foregrounded. The image is of a powerful gesture of physical and vocal female energy. Moreover, while costume and props of Brook's production strove towards authenticity, the set was very minimal: the lack of clutter and construction meant that the location of the space as a theatre was also foregrounded, especially as the play was presented in a marquee at Vidy-Lausanne, with the two supporting poles of the marquee visible on stage. There was no naturalistic arrangement of space for exits and entrances – when Jack first appeared he walked across the back of the set and emerged from behind the kitchen dresser. A cyclorama was used, creating a symmetrical semicircular rhythm to the back of the stage. For much of the play the cyclorama was subdued, except for the end of act one and throughout act two when a golden late afternoon light was brought up on the image of a wheatfield stretching into the distance. The wheatfield image contained no clearly identifiable geographical or cultural details and there was no attempt to unite the projected image and the props and furniture on stage into a coherent, naturalistic space. I would argue that this combination of specific Irish references, Francophone dialogue, generic images of a rural setting and metatheatricality produced a tension between location and dislocation that respected the alterity of the source text and culture while placing the emphasis of the production on the immediacy of the theatrical encounter which takes place 'in the liminal space between stage and auditorium' (Johnston 2011: 25).

## Re-embodiment Irishness

A major element of Brook's production was the movement / choreography, which was evident throughout the *mise en scène*.<sup>23</sup> Any translation, whether textual or theatrical needs to take account of equivalent gestural and corporeal codes - what Patrice Pavis terms the 'language-body' – between source and target texts and cultures (Pavis 1992: 143). *Dancing at Lughnasa* foregrounds the importance of gestuality and corporeal performance since moments of story-telling, narration and dialogue are juxtaposed not only with the sisters' dancing but with other nonverbal sequences such as the stiff movements of Jack recalling his Ryangan rituals, Gerry's elegant ballroom dancing, and the exchanged hats between Father Jack and Gerry. In Brook's *mise en scène* the uncluttered set focused on the actors' performances, both in terms of characterisation and physical movement. Many reviews stressed the ensemble work of the five actresses,<sup>24</sup> yet each role was physicalised in individual detail: Kate's proud stiffness, Agnes's repressed nervousity, Rose's uncoordinated sense of movement and unrepressed affection, aggression and sexuality, Maggie's slightly masculine gait and sense of humour. Chris was perhaps the least 'marked' suggesting a character who is a bridge between the past rural world depicted and that of a contemporary audience. The somatics of the *mise en scène* also incorporated other non-Irish culturally coded movements. Near the very beginning of the play Rose starts to dance in what is described in Friel's text as a 'shuffle', and in Besset's translation as '*se trémousser*' (to wriggle about). In Brook's *mise en scène* she and Maggie performed a wild but recognisable can-can. The central ensemble dance in Brook's production was instigated by a burst of traditional Irish music from the

radio set, but referenced Irish dance only tangentially and most recognisably in Kate's individual steps: for the others, the movement was exaggerated, with the women moving sometimes together sometimes alone in a non-culturally-specific rhythm and formation. After the music stopped, the physical sounds of the breathless women carried on for some time, especially Rose's gasps in a post-orgasmic exhaustion. The cast of *Danser à Lughnasa* embodied Irishness, but in way that avoided essentialized concepts of an 'Irish body'<sup>25</sup>. Paul Taylor, writing for *The Independent*, who saw the original 1990 Abbey production, writes:

The French actors don't pretend to be Irish: indeed, the production is an object lesson in how a 'foreign' cast can show us how what we took to be cultural essentials are in fact secondary characteristics. Purified of all trace of any 'beguiling, begorra' quality, the emotional profundity of *Dancing at Lughnasa* shines out all the more clearly. (Taylor 1999)

The more colloquial aspects of Jean-Marie Besset's translation were removed in performance, which, along with the minimal set and generic projection of a wheat / cornfield on the cyclorama, tended to present the play as evoking a generalized rural past which French, Francophone Swiss, or other audiences might connect with. Brook's production therefore acknowledged the Irishness of the source text and culture, but avoided targeting a specific alternative context or location, so that the highly physicalized *mise en scène* allowed alternative points of identification and empathy with this rural past / cultural memory. The physical choreography included

frequent affectionate physical contact between the sisters, notwithstanding moments of tension, which foregrounded their attempts to maintain solidarity against the religious and social conservatism of their society and the economic constraints of their rural livelihood.

## **Conclusion**

By dislocating *Dancing at Lughnasa* from the details of its historical context, *Danser à Lughnasa* lost the political specificity of its critique of the institutional authority of the Catholic Church and the lack of gender and economic equality in Irish women's lives. However, by placing Irishness on the international stage, the production engaged in an alternative politics of representation: that of translating and representing a foreign text and culture. Brook's *mise en scène* acknowledged the cultural and historical location of Friel's text, but also re-embodied Irishness within a set of cross-cultural and culturally layered conditions of translation, production and performance, avoiding an overtly stereotyped or essentialized performance of Irishness. As Taylor's review above suggests, translated texts and foreign productions of Irish plays can estrange performances of Irishness, and indeed, in this case, dislocate the play from its association with the Mason production and a largely national framework through which literary Irish drama has been interpreted<sup>26</sup>. Brook's production I have argued, while foregrounding the performative energy of her ensemble cast, also presented embodiments of Irishness which were, as Cerquoni suggests: 'less burdened by national traditions and inherited visual formats [and] characterized by inclusiveness, open-endedness, non-linearity and multi-

dimensionality'. Since co-productions across cultural, linguistic and national borders are increasingly the norm, such mediation between specificity and intercultural hybridity or 'interweaving' remains a challenge for both theatre practitioners and scholars.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> I am using the term ‘cross-cultural’ as defined by Ian Watson: ‘the cross-cultural refers to a situation in which many cultural influences or fragments co-exist explicitly in one cohesive object, space, event or ritual’, ‘Introduction’, *Negotiating Cultures: Eugenio Barba and the Intercultural Debate*, Ian Watson and colleagues, eds, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002, p. 4. The term is related to others such as ‘intercultural’, where there is more of a merging or fusing of different cultural traces (Watson 2002: 5), ‘transcultural’, which attempts to transcend cultural differences (Watson 2002: 4), and ‘multicultural’ defined by Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo in relation to theatre as ‘theatre works featuring a racially mixed cast that do not actively draw attention to cultural differences among performers or to the tensions between the text and the production context’ (Gilbert and Lo 2002: 33). Exact boundaries between these terms are difficult to draw, however.

<sup>2</sup> See for example O’Malley 2011 and Fernandes 2012. Analyses of foreign translations of Irish theatre include Wallace 2003, and Mesterházi 2006. The work of Michael Cronin has been very significant in debating issues of translation in relation to Irish Studies more generally, for example, Cronin 1996. Foreign productions of Samuel Beckett’s theatre have been explored in, for example, Nixon and Feldman 2009, and work has been done on his self-translations since an early stage in Beckett Studies (see for example, Cohn 1961).

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Mesterházi 2006, Pine 2006, O’Malley 2011, and Dixon and Rupp Malone 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Since Friel is not fluent in Russian, he usually works with a range of other English language translations from which he shapes his own version (O’Malley 2011: 72).

<sup>5</sup> After its premiere in Dublin, Mason’s production transferred to the West End in London and to Broadway where it played for a year from October 1991 – October 1992, and garnered three Tony awards: for Best Play, Best Director, and Best Featured Performance (Bríd Brennan as Agnes); it also won an outstanding director and best ensemble performance in the Drama Desk awards of 1992.

<sup>6</sup> MS 37,051 /8. These manuscript numbers refer to items in the Friel Papers at the National Library of Ireland Archives, Dublin. Friel’s interests in France were initially managed directly by Curtis Brown but were taken over by DRAMA, based in Paris. Friel’s agent there was initially Pascale de

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Boysson and then Suzanne Sarquier, who dealt with rights relating to *Dancing at Lughnasa* during the 1990's.

<sup>7</sup> *Translations* was adapted by Pierre Laville as 'La Dernière Classe', directed by Jean-Claude Amyl and presented by Théâtre des Mathurins, in Paris, in the autumn of 1984 (MS 37,087 /14). Two years later, in 1986, the Compagnie Laurent Terzieff at Théâtre de Lucernaire, Lucernaire Centre National d'Art et d'Essai, Paris, presented 'Témoignages sur Ballybeg', an adaptation of *Faith Healer* by Pol Quentin. This was directed by Laurent Terzieff and starred Pascale de Boysson, Laurent Terzieff and Jacques Marchand (MS 37,077 /14). *Saisons de l'Amour*, a translation of Friel's *Lovers*, had been published by Presses Universitaires de Lille in 1982, translated by Godeleine Carpentier et Françoise Vreck, and Pelletier notes several productions of *Saisons* in the 1990's.

<sup>8</sup> The theatre programme included a visit by the Abbey Theatre bringing Artistic Director Patrick Mason's productions of Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, and J.M. Synge's *The Well of the Saints*. Six plays by contemporary Irish playwrights were translated for the occasion, and given readings at the Comédie Française. See Famchon 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Marie Besset's translation was given a full production in 1997 by Théâtre de l'Écrou, based in Fribourg, in Francophone Switzerland, directed by Canadian born Michael Jocelyn. A fax from Suzanne Sarquier to Leah Schmidt of The Agency, on 23 October 1997 indicates that non-exclusive permission was given for this production to tour in France (except Paris) from September to December 1998 (Friel Papers, MS 37,112/1).

<sup>10</sup> These include a further production of Besset's translation of *Danser à Lughnasa* directed by Guy Freixe in 2003/4 which played at numerous Paris theatres including Le Théâtre du Soleil, and a production of *Molly Sweeney* translated by Alain Delahaye, directed by Laurent Terzieff at the Gaîté Montparnasse in 2005. In 2009/10 in order to celebrate Friel's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday a series of his texts were translated into French by Delahaye.

<sup>11</sup> Email from Jean-Marie Besset to this author, 1 September 2012. Reproduced with kind permission from Jean-Marie Besset.

<sup>12</sup> See Pavis 1992, pp. 183-216, or, for a more critical perspective, Bharucha 1990: 68-87.

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<sup>13</sup> This information came from Féral 2007, and from various websites, including the Salzburg Festival website 2012: [http://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/Portals/0/dossier-essay/Dossier\\_Peer\\_Gynt\\_2012\\_E.pdf](http://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/Portals/0/dossier-essay/Dossier_Peer_Gynt_2012_E.pdf) (accessed 9 November 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Irina Brook came across the play in 1995 at the Humana Festival in Louisville Kentucky, when its premiere was directed by László Marton.

<sup>15</sup> In 2000, Irina Brook received a Molière (French theatre award) for her French language production of Katherine Burger's *Resonances*, and a promising newcomer prize from la Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques. The next year, 2001, a revival of *La Bête sur la Lune*, which had been made into a film for television, won 7 nominations and 5 awards in the Molières (Best Repertory Play, Best Adaptation, Best Direction, Best Actress and Best Actor). Irina Brook has directed opera, contemporary adaptations of classic works including Homer, Shakespeare, Cervantes and Ibsen, incorporating movement and music, and children's adaptations such as *The Canterville Ghost*, adapted from Oscar Wilde's story, which she directed during her residency at Shakespeare and Co, based in Massachusetts, United States, in 2008/9. In 2012 she created a new English language production of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* for the Salzburg Festival and also presented her touring production of *La Tempête*, a version of Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Her theatre company is the Compagnie Irina Brook.

<sup>16</sup> Brook's *mise en scène* of *Danser à Lughnasa* was a co-production between Théâtre Vidy-Lausanne, MC 93 Bobigny, Paris and Le Phénix-Scène Nationale de Valenciennes, with the support of l'AFAA-Ministère des Affaires Étrangères and Pro Helvetica, Fondation suisse pour la culture. It was commissioned by the late Rene Gonzales, who had moved from MC93 Bobigny to Théâtre-Vidy Lausanne in the early 1990's where he remained until his death in 2012. It premiered at Vidy on 9<sup>th</sup> March 1999, and toured to the Tokyo Arts Festival in October 1999, and then to venues in France and Switzerland ending with a run from 23rd November to 19th December at MC 93 Bobigny. The cast was Laura Benson (Maggie), Thierry Bosc (Jack), Robert Bouvier (Michael), Corinne Jaber (Chris), Brontis Jodorowsky (Gerry), Arsinée Khanjian (Agnes), Hélène Lapiower (Rose), Josiane Stoléru (Kate).



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<sup>17</sup> See Appiah: 2006. In relation to theatre, see, for example, Gilbert and Lo: 2007. Cosmopolitanism and the related term ‘conviviality’ are discussed in Holdsworth 2010: 66-80.

<sup>18</sup> See for example, interviews with Thierry Bosc, Irene Jacob and Irina Brook herself included in a francophone film made of Irina Brook’s work in 2003: *Irina Brook: Le Plaisir Contagieux*, directed by Serge Avedikian, for the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (Trans Europe Film CNRS Images / Media En association avec France 5). This video can be accessed online at: <http://videotheque.cnrs.fr/doc=1158> (accessed 9 November 2012).

<sup>19</sup> ‘Entretien: Irina Brook, danseuse à Lughnasa’, *La Terrasse*, Novembre 1999.

<sup>20</sup> I didn’t see the production live but on a video that was kindly made available by the Théâtre-Vidy for information purposes only. I am most grateful to Xavier Munger, of Théâtre Vidy-Lausanne, to Laura Benson, who put me in contact with Xavier, to Martine Pelletier, and to Eileen Denn Jackson who first drew my attention to this production, and assisted my research on the production at MC93 Bobigny.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Laura Benson: une balade irlandaise’, *Le Figaro*, 7 décembre, 1999.

<sup>22</sup> Personal interview, London, June 15<sup>th</sup> 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Fiona Battersby is credited with dance and movement in the programme.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Jean-Pierre Lionardini, ‘Éteignez vos portables’, *L’Humanité*, 29 novembre 1999, or Brigitte Salino, ‘Cinq soeurs dans la compagne d’Irlande, l’été 36’, *Le Monde*, 7 décembre 1999.

<sup>25</sup> In *Performing the Body in Irish Theatre* Bernadette Sweeney argues that: ‘To perform the body in the Irish theatre context is to do so within a specific set of cultural conditions. But these conditions are in a constant state of flux, and therefore to essentialise the Irish context is as dangerous as to essentialise the Irish body within that context’ (Sweeney 2008: 14).

<sup>26</sup> This has been changing over the last decade or so, as performance studies is opening up new approaches to Irish theatre and performance. See Sweeney 2008 and Brady and Walsh 2009.