

Translations by Brian Friel

An Abbey Theatre and Lyric Theatre co-production

**Audio Description Programme Notes
for the matinee performance in the Abbey Theatre
Saturday 30th July 2022, at 2pm**

Welcome to the audio description introduction to **Translations** by Brian Friel at the Abbey Theatre.

The play is directed by Caitríona McLaughlin. Set Design is by Joanna Parker, with Costume Design by Catherine Fay and Lighting Design by Paul Keogan. The Sound Designer is Carl Kennedy.

The performance runs for approximately two hours and thirty minutes with one fifteen minute interval.

ABOUT THE PLAY

A quote from the play *'You can learn to decode us'*

It's August 1833. The pupils have gathered in a hedge-school in the townland of Baile Beag/Ballybeg. This Irish-speaking community in Donegal, has become the unlikely focal point for a changing world.

Progress is coming. Tensions are growing. There are plans for a new English-speaking national school and a group of Royal Engineers have arrived to map the area.

Translations examines the fractious relationship between people and nations through the lens of language and (mis)communication.

Brian Friel's modern masterpiece finds a new potency, in a time where Brexit has thrown current Anglo-Irish relations into sharp relief, redrawing old boundaries, and opening up old wounds. Abbey Theatre Artistic Director and Donegal native Caitríona McLaughlin opens a hotly anticipated new production of *Translations* in Belfast before a summer run on the Abbey stage.

"I think that is how the political problem of this island is going to be solved. It's going to be solved by language in some kind of way. Not only the language of negotiations across the table. It's going to be solved by the recognition of what language means for us on this island." Brian Friel in conversation with Fintan O'Toole, 1982.

ABOUT THE SET

The play is set in a rural hedge-school in Hugh and Manus's barn, a sparse layout. At the back of the space a raked stage that reaches across the space and slopes sideways and downwards towards the hedge school in the front half of the stage – a grey floor with a dusting of rustic pink earth weaving its way across horizontally in front of the barn roof/hill, this floor is the inside of a barn. The sloped stage behind representing both the roof of the sunken barn and the hills of Donegal. The hill has ridges at the edge like clumps of earth. Characters walk and sit upon it. Behind the hill and to the sides of the stage are unseen sloped floors reaching upwards to meet the ridge of the hill and the sloped floors either side meeting the flat land where Hugh and Manus live, with the hedge

school barn floor to our right. The slopes behind the land/barn give us the impression when characters enter and leave that they really are trekking up and over hills towards us and away.

To our right in front of the hill is a simple wooden table facing inwards with a comfortable looking wooden chair that has arm rests and a woven seat placed to the right of it, used only by the scholars Hugh and Manus. At the beginning of the play one large book sits upon the table with small piles of books nestled on the floor by its wooden legs. High up over the table hangs an over sized plumbline, a tool used to find the vertical axis by pointing to the center of gravity – a bronze weight a combination of hemisphere and cone with a rope connecting it to a sack of sand for balance which hangs up over the back edge of the hill to our right.

A simple wooden milk stool a bit battered round the edges rests a little nearer to the center, ready to be used as a makeshift study desk when needed. A wooden butter box sits just left of center next to the hill to be used as another makeshift desk or seat. Students sit before us on the floor of the barn and on the stool or butter box.

Tucked into the far left of the stage is a wooden structure with a sloped roof. It symbolizes the home of Hugh and Manus which only they enter. A handful of external wooden steps at the front lead up to a room to our left, bare but for a white wash basin with white water jug placed upon a wooden table. At times the light hits the room and the basin and jug brighten ghostlike. Behind the house is a floor level storage space filled with tools and hedge school material, a small wooden bucket with rope handles sits beside it.

The back wall of The Abbey stage can be seen in this play, a brick wall freshly painted black. Sometimes shadows fall onto the wall as dusk meets evening light.

The lighting in this show is incredibly atmospheric, at times the audience could almost be looking at a painting with the golden hue of a dramatic sunset giving a mythical feeling, or more muted earth tones of dusky pink and blue mixed with the mist coming off the hills. Or sometimes a bright daylight.

ABOUT THE CAST AND COSTUMES

All the locals but for Hugh walk barefoot, their feet muddy from the damp earth and their ragged clothes also.

I'll describe the characters in order of appearance. **Sarah** is a local woman played by **Suzie Seweify**, a woman somewhere between late teens to early thirties. She is a nervous character with a compulsion to lower her head but there is strength in the way she expresses herself when she rises. She busies herself reading and marking table, stool and slate tablet with Arabic hieroglyphics. When she raises her head to meet someone's gaze we can see under her long dark wild matted hair, her strong jaw line and large expressive brown eyes. Sarah wears a frayed royal blue linen skirt that rests at the ankles with a threadbare cream blouse. In the second half of the play Sarah is the only local to change from rags into a fine teal green heavy silk floral print long dress sent to her from Boston and fashionable for the time. Fitted at the waist with a v shaped neckline and three quarter length sleeves.

Sarah has a speech impediment which **Manus** played by **Marty Rea** helps her with. He is the eldest son of the master of the hedge school and also a scholar. Sarah and Manus appear to be good friends, teasing each other playfully they can often be found huddled together. Manus is about 30 years old give or take. He wears tan brown linen trousers frayed at the edges filthy with mud and an equally crumpled and worn out shirt with a khaki green waistcoat over it. Manus has a limp as his

right leg is lame, his right foot and leg wrapped in a strip of rag up to the knee, his left foot bare. His dark curls are cut short and his facial expression intense although he can smile on occasion especially when in playful humour with Sarah.

Jimmy Jack played by **Ronan Leahy** often sits alone on the hill reading his book. Jimmy is an older man of fifty years of age or so. He is dressed a little differently than the other local men as his brown linen trousers have been cut off below the knee, over the top he wears the remnants of a shirt and brown sleeveless jumper and what was once a smart dark blue three quarter length morning suit jacket now ripped and worn. All his clothes, bare feet and shins are soiled with earth from walking and sitting in all weathers. On his head a grey cap. On his hands brown fingerless gloves worn and torn with time. Jimmy's mousy brown hair peeps out from under his skullcap, his bushy beard tinged with grey. On his nose rests small round metal rimmed spectacles, this outfit is finished off with a rag for a scarf around his neck.

Maire played by **Zara Devlin** is the next to arrive bare footed to the hedge-school. A young woman perhaps in her early twenties wearing a burgundy coloured linen skirt similar to Sarah's and an off white blouse. Although her clothes are muddied they seem to be less worn than the other characters. Maire's delicate facial features are framed by her auburn hair pinned up away from her face, stands of hair falling in curls about her neck. She has mud on her face, neck, hands and feet. Maire has a sturdy walk and a glint in her eyes.

Doalty played by **Andy Doherty** and **Bridget** played by **Ruby Campbell** are the next to run over the hill to meet the others. Doalty is another young man of an age between late teens and thirty, wearing equally ragged and dirty clothes of camel coloured corduroy trousers and beige linen shirt. His youthful face partially hidden behind a red bushy beard to match his short red hair. His fellow student Bridget of similar age and exuberance also wanders bare footed, same ankle length skirt as the other women but in a khaki colour with a lighter khaki coloured

blouse that has a collar. Her sleeves are rolled up as if ready to work. Bridget's dusty blonde hair is pulled away from her face in a loose ponytail.

The last local man to stride over the hill is the master of the hedge school himself **Hugh** played by **Brian Doherty**. He holds himself tall, dignified and proud. He arrives swinging a cane and wears a top hat that has seen better days. His clothes are even more dirty than the others, as if he's been rolling around in the earth in his cream trousers that are buttoned over his paunch belly. He wears a light peach coloured shirt tucked in with a burgundy coloured waistcoat buttoned over the top of his paunch. Sometimes he wears a dirty black overcoat that has rips in it. Hugh is in his late fifties, ruddy faced with a grey receding hair line and beard. As time goes by Hugh weaves drunkenly about the place. Unlike the others he has black suede boots on his feet.

His younger son **Owen** played by **Leonard Buckley** arrives from Dublin dressed finely in light coloured attire of tan trousers and a cream pristine linen open necked shirt over which he wears a brown waistcoat and a tan coloured morning jacket. On his feet fine brown leather shin high boots. His honey blonde hair combed away from his face.

Lastly the British royal engineers in their redcoats arrive – the older **Captain Lancy** played by **Howard Teale** and **Lieutenant Yolland** a young man played by **Aidan Moriarty**. Both men wear the redcoat uniform of black trousers with a thick red stripe down the side, white starched shirt and red jacket with black cuffs and collar with gold trimming and polished shin high black leather wide legged boots. Lieutenant Yolland is a young friendly enthusiastic chap with short brown hair. Captain Lancy sports a grey haired short back and sides hair cut and a stern expression.

That concludes the audio description introduction for **Translations**. They were prepared by Mo Harte. Audio description at the Abbey Theatre is provided by Arts & Disability Ireland with support from The Arts Council.

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