Translations
by Brian Friel

Education Background Pack
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On Friel

“[Friel’s] characters are deeply engaged in attempts to ‘translate’ the confused, complicated experiences of their lives into stories with shape and meaning; always in relation to the wider history.”
Professor Katharine Worth – Translations of History: Story-telling in Brian Friel’s Theatre

“Brian is a writer who’s always said, ‘I don’t know.’ He hates answering questions about his writing, and I know that from having directed his plays. He will not answer the questions. I think that’s perfectly justifiable.”
Mark Lambert, actor and director

“I have seen some non-Irish actors do his work brilliantly. I want to say that because it’s international what he does.”
Niall Buggy, actor

“I have not come across another playwright bar Shakespeare that actors cling to with such devotion and who is spoken so fondly of.”
Connell Morrison, director

“…the text is vital. Not just the words, his punctuation, and his semi-colons and his dots-dots-dots… and his dashes!… It’s like orchestration, there’s duets, there’s trios, there’s quintets, there’s solos, and each of these has to be taken on that level and each of these has to be performed as cleanly, as unselfishly really, as possible.”
Rosaleen Linehan, actress

“Friel has a remarkable capacity to convey dialogue which actors can speak with ease and which yet provides a sense of beauty and roundness. The rhythms of speech are not only created to carefully indicate the meaning of the speech but also to convey the essence of the character. Each character is given just the right level of articulateness and just the right vocabulary to illustrate social and educational background”
Joe Dowling, director

BRIAN FRIEL, ABOUT WORKING ON TRANSLATIONS

“The thought occurred to me that what I was circling around was a political play and how that thought panicked me. But is it a political play – how can that be avoided? If it is not political, what is it? Inaccurate history? Social drama?”
1979

“I don’t want to write a play about Irish peasants being suppressed by English sappers. I don’t want to write a threnody on the death of the Irish language, I don’t want to write a play about land-surveying. Indeed I don’t want to write a play about the naming of places. And yet portions of all these are relevant. Each is part of the atmosphere in which the real play lurks.”
1979

BRIAN FRIEL’S PLACE IN IRISH THEATRE

Irish writers have played an important part in the history of British theatre over the past 400 years. Heading the list among the few playwrights we still watch from the 18th century are William Congreve, George Farquhar and Richard Sheridan. In the 19th century, George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde; and in the 20th century, writers like Sean O’Casey, Samuel Beckett and Brian Friel continued the great tradition of Irish writers. In the 1990s there seemed to be an explosion of Irish playwriting talent as Martin McDonagh, Marie Jones, Marina Carr, Billy Roche, Conor McPherson and Sebastian Barry hit the London stage with exciting new plays.
Brian Friel has been one of the most consistently successful Irish playwrights since the second half of the 20th century. He has been writing plays for over 40 years and in 2005 had two plays in London: Aristocrats at the National Theatre and The Home Place at the Comedy Theatre in the West End. Now this new National Theatre production of Translations tours the UK. Brian Friel’s first big success was in 1964 with Philadelphia, Here I Come!, a play about a young man leaving claustrophobic Ireland for a new life in America and all the opportunity for freedom it offered. Similarly, in Translations, Maire dreams of leaving the confines of Ireland to explore a new life in America, with a new language.

In 1980, Friel formed Field Day Theatre Company along with actor Stephen Rea, with the hope of establishing an important new theatre company for Northern Ireland. Translations was their first production. It was set in 19th-century Ireland in a period of great change. Friel moved even further back in time in his 1988 play, Making History, about the 16th century Earl of Tyrone, Hugh O’Neill, who led a Spanish-backed uprising against the British but was defeated at the Battle of Kinsale. The battle was a comprehensive defeat that ended a period of nine years of Irish resistance.

Field Day developed and other important Irish literary figures, such as Seamus Heaney and Tom Paulin joined, creating a company capable of addressing the cultural issues at the heart of the ongoing conflict in Northern Ireland.

In 1990, Friel had his biggest commercial success with Dancing at Lughnasa, a play with a strong autobiographical element. It is set in the small fictional community of Ballybeg in rural Donegal, a strangely-situated county of Southern Ireland that on a map exists entirely alongside the province of Ulster and Northern Ireland. It is a part of Ireland that Friel knows well. Translations is set about 100 years earlier in the same place. Aristocrats (1979) and Philadelphia, Here I Come! also feature Ballybeg as a location and in Wonderful Tennessee (1993), the action takes place on a ‘remote pier in north-west Donegal’. There is something important about locating these plays in Donegal: its odd situation in the geography of Ireland and its ambivalent location makes it a perfect place for the questions that Friel’s plays raise.

Friel has continued to produce a body of work that marks him out as one of the great Irish playwrights. It is impossible to sum up what he writes about in one or two sentences, but there are recurring themes. Friel’s plays often deal with identity, discovering what is the truth and how we communicate with each other, particularly through the language that we have available. Language, place names, names of rituals and traditions all feature strongly in his work. Language, for Friel, is closely linked with the question of who we are: the vocabulary we use and the inflections and pronunciation of our language are part of our history, as is the way language develops with the words taken from other languages and then adapted. Memory also forms a vital strand of Friel’s work – not just the individual memory, but also collective memory, when a group of people or a community recall the past and the effect it has on their present. Sometimes that individual or shared memory may be false. Importantly Friel deals with factual history, but reminds us we all have a personal history which is equally valid and may contain many different and contradicting experiences and identities.

Friel has often been referred to as the ‘Irish Chekhov’. It is slightly fatuous to make this easy sort of reference but it does, to some degree, describe the essential qualities of his plays: depth of character, an unwillingness to take an obvious political or critical position on his characters, an ability to write with humour and sadness so close to each other and an interest in how we are all part of the moving train of history.
The play

**TRANSLATIONS PRODUCTION HISTORY**

First performance: 23 September 1980 at the Guildhall, Derry, directed by Art O’Briain
The cast included Stephen Rea as Owen, Ray McAnally as Hugh, Nuala Hayes as Maire and Liam Neeson as Doalty.

The play transferred to Hampstead Theatre, London in 1981 and then opened in the Lyttelton at the National Theatre on 6 August 1981, with Ian Bannen as Hugh and Gabriel Byrne as Manus.

There have been many revivals, but the next major West End production was at the Donmar Warehouse in 1993, directed by Sam Mendes with Finbar Lynch as Manus, Zara Turner as Maire and Norman Rodway as Hugh.

It was revived at the Abbey, Dublin in 2001.

Translations is still one of the most popular of Friel’s plays and, along with Dancing at Lughnasa, it has become a work revived regularly in Ireland, the UK and in America.

**PRESS REVIEWS**

**NT, 1981, directed by Donald McWhinnie**

“Donald McWhinnie’s dynamic production in the last mesmerising stage freezes his characters into postures of stillness and foreboding as if they had already dreamed the disaster which is about to arrive. But it is all implied rather than stated in action. Also a series of contrasts exist and extend through the play: the rough literalism of the soldier’s language compares with the romantic classical

esclamism of the school teacher and his Homeric companion, the gulf between the two tongues, the dumb girl whose every utterance ruins everything and the go-between brother who speaks two languages and causes the devastating breach.”

Nicholas de Jongh, *Guardian*

“…this is not only the finest play to come out of Ireland for years in its unfailingly theatrical instinct and wide, warm sense of comedy. It is also simply a very fine play, because it takes a familiar theme – the invasion of one civilisation by another – and shows how once that has happened the best will in the world is no solution to the mounting resentment of the natives. Compromise must be the only hope”

Eric Shorter, *Daily Telegraph*

**The Donmar, 1993, directed by Sam Mendes**

“…what began as a John Ford comedy of Irish misunderstanding has become the tragedy which is to last until this very day. *Translations* is an ordnance survey of Irish humanity, in which the present is shaped by the past and the makers of maps have become the destroyers of the land they charted.”

Sheridan Morley, *The Spectator.*

“Friel doesn’t make statements; he explores the possibilities. But clearly he is implying that Anglo-Irish relationships are forever strained by history…”

“Maire, the farm girl, (is) as much swayed by a romantic vision of England as her soldier-lover is by the mysterious otherness of Ireland. Maybe the tenacity of the myth is what this fascinating play is finally about.”

Michael Billington, *Guardian*

**Seanachai Theatre Company Chicago, 1999**

“As Friel well knows, many things are lost in translation, some irrevocably. He also understands that to hold onto the past can be self-destructive. ‘To remember everything is a form of madness,’ says Jimmy Jack (a spirited performance by Gary Houston), the local literary scholar fluent in Latin, Greek and Gaelic. As Maire, who dreams of going to America, pragmatically sees it, ‘The old language is a barrier to progress.’”

Heidi Weiss, *Chicago Tribune*
Political and historical context

**England and Ireland before 1800**
The English relationship with Ireland has, until very recent times, proved a troubled, violent and controversial history. Unattached as it is to mainland Britain and yet so close, it was always seen as posing a security risk to successive English administrations. The Irish were persecuted under the Plantagenets and the Tudors, although the English never found it possible to conquer Ireland completely and were only ever safe in an area of the country around Dublin known as The Pale.

After the English reformation, Ireland became an even more threatening proposition to the English. Its adherence to the Catholic faith, after Britain had become Protestant, meant it was suspected, often with good cause, of offering support to foreign invasions and revolutions such as the Spanish Armada, the Jacobean uprising and Napoleon Bonaparte.

**Landownership**
In the 18th century, the Government of Ireland was in Dublin but The Act of Union in 1801 transferred political power back to London. As the 18th century progressed, England developed as an industrial nation, yet Ireland remained almost totally agricultural and the population relied on farming and its by-products as the source of income. Most of the land in Ireland was owned by absentee landlords who cared little about the lives of the workers or even the state of their farms. The main interest lay in extracting rent from the tenants. Many of these landlords lived most of the time in England and left their land in the hands of agents who in turn leased out the land to managers. The system encouraged corruption, greed and bad management of the farms. Families were crowded onto small patches of land which they rented with little chance of producing enough food to feed themselves. Tenants who were unable to pay their rent were ruthlessly evicted and often the agents would call in the army or the police to enforce eviction. The Duke of Wellington, not often seen as a friend of the poor, was forced to admit after visiting Ireland, that ‘There never was a country where poverty existed to the extent that it exists in Ireland’. As farmers got poorer they were forced to sell more of their cereal crops for money, while growing more potatoes for their own food.

**The Potato Famine**
Uncontrolled by disinterested landlords and ineffective agents, the dishonest managers sold land off for profit and the result was little or no real management of the farms and their crops. Increasingly small-holdings brought greater income to the agents and middlemen but it also led to inefficient farming methods and dependence on one crop, the potato. When a disease of potatoes called ‘potato blight’ struck, there was no alternative source of food. There had been failures in the early 19th century, but the Great Famine came in 1845 – not longer after the setting of Translations – and with terrible consequences struck again through 1847 and 1848. It is estimated that between 1845 and 1848, 1 million Irish people died of starvation, cholera or typhoid, diseases associated with famine. In Translations, Doalty, Maire, Bridget and Manus discuss the crops and the fear they all have of the “sweet smell” that precedes the coming of the famine:

Bridget: They say that’s the way it snakes in, don’t they? First the smell; then one morning the stalks are all black and limp”

In 1830, moves to tackle poverty in Ireland led to the introduction of the workhouse. A similar scheme existed in England where instead of offering money or food for poor people to live in their own communities, it was thought cheaper and more discouraging to create local buildings where the poor would be housed, given a minimum of food and arduous and repetitive work to do. Families were separated on arrival and conditions were generally very harsh and uncompromising. A total of 130 workhouses were commissioned in Ireland in the 1830s. Faced with death or the workhouse, a million people are estimated to have left Ireland to live in America or in England. It should be said that not all landlords were heartless and unsympathetic: some like Lord Caledon paid the expenses for many of his tenants to emigrate to America.
Ireland at the time of Translations

At the end of the 18th century, the mapping of Britain began and in 1824 Major Thomas Colby and his staff moved to Ireland to begin mapping the country and establishing a standard and anglicisation of place names. The maps were finally produced in 1830. This work was overseen by the Royal Engineers of the British army.

A system of National Schools had been introduced into Ireland in 1831 to combat the growing influence of hedge schools. Hedge schools had grown out of the need in local communities to combat the laws restricting the rights of Catholics – Irish Catholics could not vote or hold any official position in local or national government. They had no right to purchase land or to educate their children at home or abroad. Without a system of education in place, the hedge schools appeared, functioning in caves, little huts, barns or any secret location. Teachers were usually priests, storytellers, musicians or men of some academic background, like Hugh in Translations. The standard of education could often be quite high and English visitors to Ireland were surprised at the knowledge of classical Greek stories and Latin language among the inhabitants they came across in country areas. The relaxation of the laws against Catholics in 1831 and the creation of a system of acceptable education meant the hedge schools gradually disappeared. Most importantly, the National Schools of Ireland introduced a system of instruction in which English was to be the only language.
Areas to explore:

- The importance of language in defining who we are, including place names and personal names
- The means by which characters communicate with each other
- The attitudes which different characters have towards language, what use it has for them, how they apply it in their speech
- The relationship between the population of a country and an occupying force or outside group who impose rules and regulations on the inhabitants.
- Can an occupying force ever be benevolent?

Translations introduced many of the central issues that would occupy Field Day's intellectual and artistic explorations of the Northern Irish crisis. The play examines the relationship of language to identity, memory, history, and community. It is a statement about colonialism, and about the problematic and complex range of choices the colonised face between resistance and acquiescence.

Translations depicts the forces of cultural imperialism through the colonial project of mapping Ireland. It also deals with the demise of the hedge schools and their highly individual form of teaching, in favour of the national schools that unify what is taught and most importantly will only use English as a medium of communication and instruction.

It also deals with the need to modernise and develop. Maire wants to learn English to open new worlds of opportunity to travel and work. There is also a danger of living in a past built on myths and outdated traditions. Hugh, the schoolmaster, says "it can happen that a civilization can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour that no longer matches the landscape of fact." And the question of Gaelic versus English is not presented sentimentally.

The subjects of occupation and colonial relationships are strong throughout the play. At the beginning, the news that British horses have disappeared precedes the apparently friendly relationships between the British forces and the Irish inhabitants of Ballybeg, making us aware that there is resentment and resistance already. But after the disappearance of Yolland, the brutal retribution of the British army emphasises how impossible it is for colonial powers to be at home in the country they are in.

Brian Friel has said that "The play has to do with language and only language", and the central theme of the play certainly revolves around the subject of names and links between personal and place names and identity. Everything we understand about our community and our culture is connected to the names we possess and the language we use to communicate with. Without the ownership that comes with names and language we can feel disposed and rootless. It is interesting to note that Sarah, who has trouble saying her name, also has trouble establishing her personal identity. Once the soldiers arrive, she is silenced. Maire and Yolland struggle to communicate because the translation of what they are saying is not enough to communicate the differences in their culture and way of life. It is only when they move beyond conventional spoken language in the love scene that they achieve real communication. At the end of the play all the themes converge – the brutal repression by the British forces for the disappearance of Yolland; the 'sweet smell' of the potato famine; Hugh
being replaced by a city teacher from Cork for the new national school; Maire returning to ask Hugh to teach her English for her new life in America – reprising all the main themes of language, cultural change, colonialism and pointing to the fact that these changes were compounded by the disastrous years of famine that were to follow.

Naming
Central to Translations is the cultural clash between the language of the native Irish people, Gaelic and the work of the Ordnance Survey group from England involved in not only mapping the country, but in changing the place names. The place names of any community carry its history and traditions, and the notion of a group of strangers arriving and changing the names for their own convenience is an act that would still cause conflict today. Yet Friel also suggests another side to the argument when Owen infers that the naming of things may well be irrelevant. Owen’s name is changed to Roland by the British but he says “It’s only a name. It’s the same me isn’t it?”.

COLONIALISM
Contrasting Translations by Brian Friel and Shakespeare’s The Tempest
Colonialism is a central theme in Translations. The British mappers and sappers sent to draw a map of Ireland and to anglicise the place names for the convenience of non-native inhabitants and occupying soldiers, is a powerful image of how an outside force not only occupies a country physically but will eventually begin to erode its culture, its language and its national identity. It still happens today where native or regional dialects are banned by totalitarian governments in order to eliminate opposition and centralise authority.

The British were always seen as a colonial power in Ireland, as they were in India, the West Indies and parts of Africa. But Ireland was closer to home. It was a physically separate country with its own language, music, traditions, religion myths and legends. The perpetuation of these things was seen as an obstacle to making the Irish loyal servants of the British crown. The theme of colonialism in drama is not a new one and the conflicts caused by an outside authority taking possession of an already inhabited land and dispossessing the native inhabitants of their traditional way of life is dealt with in the oldest forms of literature and drama. Shakespeare explores the same theme to some degree in his play, The Tempest.

Translations and The Tempest raise surprisingly similar questions in terms of occupation and about how the people who already inhabit an island are treated by an incoming power and how they react to their suppression. In both plays, language is discussed as a tool of control.
Colonising the Inhabitants
Prospero, in *The Tempest*, comes not as an invading force but as a man shipwrecked onto the island. In fact, his initial relationship with Ariel appears good and his attempts to educate Caliban before the play indicate he is a kindly master. We understand that Prospero had released Ariel from imprisonment in a pine tree by Sycorax the witch, Caliban's mother. But Prospero expects in return undying loyalty from Ariel. In some productions the moment when Prospero releases Ariel from his power at the end of the play is met not with thanks but with resentment and even disgust. In history there are many instances when a force which comes to liberate a country often evolves into a colonial occupation. Caliban is at first educated by Prospero, but after the attempted rape of Miranda, he is punished by Prospero and reduced to a low form of life. Caliban's speech in (Act 1 scene 2) shows his feelings about this:

This island's mine by Sycorax my mother, Which thou tak'st from me.

Prospero's troubled relationship with the inhabitants of the island parallels the question in *Translations* of whether an occupying force can ever be respected and achieve a benevolent relationship with the indigent people. Yolland attempts to respect the culture and language of Ballybeg but is ultimately destroyed by the community because no matter how he behaves towards them, he still symbolises an aggressive external force. Similarly, the response from the English military is ruthless. Yolland's disappearance is the catalyst for immediate violent reprisals, slaughtering of livestock and evictions. The true relationship of the sappers to the villagers is exposed, which is also perhaps the inevitable relationship between colonial forces and the people of a country.

Rewriting History
Both plays look at the process by which history is often a question of who tells the story. Prospero's story is how we usually read *The Tempest*. Our sympathy for Caliban is generally lessened by seeing him through Prospero and Miranda's recollections. The story of Sycorax and Caliban is not heard fully. If we look at what happens in *Translations* from the point of view of different characters, we can see how many versions of history are possible.

Language in *Translations* and *The Tempest*
*The Tempest*, like *Translations*, raises how language can be used as a means of making someone conform and removing their individuality. Miranda reminds Caliban that she pitied him and taught him how to speak, however Caliban challenges the value of the language he learnt:

When thou didst not, savage, Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like
A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes With words that made them known.

But Caliban responds with:
You taught me language, and my profit on't Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you For learning me your language.

The acquisition of language is assumed to be a refining process, but Caliban questions how much his life has improved and, in fact, uses the language that he has been taught to attack his oppressors. In *Translations*, Maire is keen to learn the English language as it will offer her opportunities that communicating only in Gaelic never can. But if the language is forced upon people as the National Schools system will, a loss of national and personal identity may occur.
Finding the dialect

INTERVIEW WITH MAJELLA HURLEY, Dialect Coach for Translations

Translations is set in a very specific part of Ireland. The chances of casting any play set in a specific location with actors from that place are very slim, so often a voice coach is employed to help actors find the right accent, whether it is a regional part of Britain, Ireland, America or any English-speaking country. Translations poses more challenges: there are Gaelic place names and phrases to pronounce correctly; Hugh often speaks Latin, and the actor playing Yolland is actually an Irishman playing an Englishman!

For Majella Hurley, voice coach for this production of Translations, the challenge of getting the actors to achieve the correct accent was greatly helped by the writing of Brian Friel: “he writes in a natural rhythm and has a fantastic ear for dialogue, so that offers the actors a lot of assistance.” (See also actress Rosaleen Linehan’s quote on page --). “Working with an Irish cast is also a great help. Some of the cast have regional accents close to Donegal and they were almost all taught Gaelic at school.”

To help with the work on regional Gaelic, Majella went to an expert. There are so many possibilities of pronunciation that the only way to get at the truth is to go to someone who really knows the subject intimately. For example, the words Ballybeg and Maire alone may vary in pronunciation across the country.

Eventually it is vital to come to a decision with cast and director so everybody uses the same sounds.

Ballybeg, although a fictional town, is thought to be located near to the actual town of Inishowen in County Donegal. Majella used that local accent as the basis for how the characters spoke and she made tapes of Inishowen locals speaking, which the actors then listened to. Although Donegal is in the north most part of Ireland, Majella wanted at all costs to avoid any of the more familiar urban sounds of Belfast and Newry. Added to that are the different and older versions of the Gaelic and Latin spoken in the play, which also need to be considered.

In rehearsal Majella usually has the actors warm up with some articulation exercises: “Getting the tongue and lips loose and flexible is the key to practising a new dialect, which will demand different positions for the lips and tongue.” When she begins to explore the new dialect and its pronunciation she advises the actors to break the words down into syllables and find out where the new sounds are placed in the mouth. For example, with the Donegal accent the tongue is lifted up in the mouth. Majella told the actors that when they smile they will feel the tongue move up to touch the roof of the mouth, and asked them to think about this. It’s a good position to begin working on the Donegal accent.

It is also important to find where the stress is placed on a word. Standard English pronunciation tends to stress the first syllable in a two-syllable word but this might differ regionally, and vowels could be longer or shorter when spoken. Actors should think about how many words make up an average phrase in a language and count the stresses, noting where a certain language or dialect tends to have pauses and hesitations. Exercises like singing a song in a dialect can be very helpful: the voice finds a more natural rhythm than speaking words - and it is fun! In the end the actor has to adapt the dialect to the sound and pitch of their own voice so that it feels comfortable in performance.
Finding the dialect

Majella stresses that in a production like *Translations* it is essential that the actors practise the dialect while they are moving and performing actions as their character, because they will have to do this in performance. It is not like learning a language for an examination: in a play you will need to move and remember to keep speaking with the right accent simultaneously.

In performance there are other important practical considerations. Remember that the audience may be new to the dialect or language and therefore careful pacing is necessary to make sure the audience can tap into the accent and understand what is being said. Most of all, Majella stresses that in striving to get an authentic accent the actor should not lose any of the power in the voice. It is essential to be heard and understood in a theatre. Obviously the most important thing is that the audience can hear clearly so that they can follow the play.

Majella aims to achieve a unity of pronunciation which is authentic but will also most importantly allow the actors to be understood by an audience.

- **Process** – visiting a specialist who can advise and researching the history
- **Problems** – which historical regional version of Gaelic to use
- **Rehearsal** – working with the actors; exercises; the difficulties of the actors’ own accents; remembering that actors will also need to move and do things when speaking

**EXERCISE 1**

1) Look at your local area. Discuss the possibility of how places were given their names.
   a) Are they named after local people? If so, do you know who they were/are or why they had a road, place or park named after them?
   b) Are they named after a local landmark or geographical location? For example ‘ford’ in a place name suggests that at some time there was a stream or small river in the area.

2) Take a small area of your local community and think about how you might rename buildings, roads or spaces.

Another way in which language features strongly in *Translations* is when two people want to communicate with each other but have to struggle because they don’t share a common language. The scene between Maire and Yolland (Act 2, scene 2) is probably the most famous scene in the play. Their determination to make themselves understood to each other overcomes the limitations that language places on them.

**EXERCISE 2**

1) Write a short conversation between a local and a visitor to your town. The visitor speaks no English. The dialogue will need to be written in English so that an audience can understand both sides of the conversation. Think of locations where the conversation could take place so that there can be a theme to the conversation. For example, place the conversation in a shop where the names of items can be used, or at a football match or dance class where specific vocabulary can be used.
Characters

Characterisation
Most naturalistic plays use characters to carry the ideas and meanings of the play. But they must also function as interesting and recognisable human beings. The job of the actor is to bring these elements together. Looking at what the character says about himself, what others say about him and what he says about others is the first way of finding out as much about the character as possible. For example, Owen’s line, ‘Lancey’s a bloody ramrod but George’s alright’ gives us an immediate insight into how Lancey and Yolland are perceived by Owen. Something of that needs to be captured in the characterisation. In Act 2 scene 1, Yolland gives a detailed description of Lancey, calling him ‘The perfect colonial servant: not only must the job be done but it must be done with excellence’.

By using the text the actor can look for all the clues towards building a full characterisation of even an apparently minor role.

Characters in Translations
Manus is one of Hugh’s two sons. At the beginning of the play, he refuses to apply for a job teaching at the new national school because his father, Hugh, has already applied for it. Manus’ relationship with Hugh is complicated: as we learn later, his lameness was caused by Hugh falling on his cradle as a baby. He hides alcohol from his father to try to keep him sober, and Owen mentions that Manus feels responsible for his father. Manus hopes that Maire will marry him but she makes it clear that if he will not improve his situation by teaching at the national school, his proposal is not practical. At the end, Manus’ precise knowledge of the disappearance of Yolland is unclear, but he obviously feels he must leave Ballybeg or he will be arrested. The events that take place lead to him finally breaking away from his father. Manus offers an actor a complex and fascinating character to play. His relationships with his father and brother, Owen, his love for Maire and his care for Sarah, all reveal different facets of his personality. He is also the character who is most suspicious and outspoken of the English forces and the name-changing that takes place. He says ‘...it’s a bloody military operation, Owen! And what’s Yolland’s function? What’s ‘incorrect’ about the place names we have here?’

Sarah is described by Friel as being ‘a waiflike creature’ who ‘could be anything from seventeen to thirty-five’. She is important, because in a play which is so concerned with language she struggles first of all to achieve communication in her own tongue, Gaelic. Sarah is a difficult part for an actress, as there are so few lines to work with. But the actress has to show Sarah’s constant alertness and reactions to everything. By telling Manus about Maire and Yolland, she precipitates the tragic ending.

Jimmy is the oddest pupil at Hugh’s hedge school. He is totally engrossed in the stories of the Greek myths. Comedy comes immediately in Act 1 in the practical way in which he deals with the story of Athene and Ulysses. Jimmy is a challenging part because the actor has to deal with funny moments without overplaying or turning the role into something of a ‘comic turn’.

David Ganly (Manus) in rehearsal

Photo: John Haynes
Maire’s aspirations are clear at the beginning of the play when she says that she has received the passage money to travel to America. She tells Manus that her reason for going to America is to support her family but she also agrees with the politician, Daniel O’Connell, who claimed ‘The old language is a barrier to modern progress’. Maire says, ‘I think he’s right. I don’t want Greek and I don’t want Latin. I want English. I want to be able to speak English because I’m going to America as soon as the harvest’s all saved.’

She totally embraces the new culture that is coming and sees English as her passport to a better life. Her action of picking up Yolland’s book of names at the end of the play is interesting. Is it a hope that he will return or evidence of blind faith and an unwillingness to believe in the truth?

Doalty is, on first reading, a simple enough character, as a farmer who attends the hedge school, but has no great desire to improve himself. But at the end of the play, his knowledge of the Donnelly twins and what may have happened to Yolland mark him out as a more complex character. Doalty’s line close to the end of the play, ‘If we’d all stick together. If we knew how to defend ourselves’ is important. Eventually in the next century the Irish did learn how to defend themselves, and the uprising of 1916 (the Easter Rising) was the beginning of an independent Ireland.

Bridget is an example of the ordinary inhabitants of rural Ireland whose lives would be destroyed both by the coming of the potato famine and the disinterest of the British government in the disaster. Her sense of the early warning of the potato blight at the end of the play is unconvincingly dismissed by Doalty as the smell from the burning English camp. She and Doalty supply some of the early fun in the play, but she is marked out from Doalty as a more enthusiastic student in Act 1.

Hugh requires discipline and attention from the actor playing him. It is easy to enjoy his florid language and slightly exaggerated pronunciations on Ireland, language and classical literature. For example, when discussing poetry and William Wordsworth with Yolland, he finishes with a flourish. ‘Wordsworth?... No. I’m afraid we’re not familiar with your literature, Lieutenant. We feel closer to the warm Mediterranean. We tend to overlook your island.’ This is a guaranteed comic moment, like when the Gravedigger in *Hamlet* tells us Hamlet has been sent to England because he is mad but wouldn’t be noticed because everyone there is mad. Hugh is ambivalent towards the re-naming of places. His great love is Latin and the classics. However at the end of the play, he finds that the job he was offered with the new national school has been given to a schoolmaster from Cork. In some ways his life is summed up in his description of when he and Jimmy in 1798 marched 23 miles to join the rebellion and then, in a pub, the group got homesick and returned to Ballybeg. His aspirations to match the heroism of the Greeks are destroyed by reality.

Owen’s confidence when he first arrives in the play, coupled with his ease with both the British soldiers and the community in Ballybeg, give...
him a unique position. His entrance is full of energy, he embraces the residents of the barn and plays games with them, challenging what they have learned from his father and brother. But his position is equivocal. He has left Ballybeg and is now paid by the English army to translate. Therefore he is the link between the two communities. His early scene translating Captain Lancey’s introduction to the community is important as it shows his ambition to keep the two sides happy. Owen’s conversation with Yolland in Act 2, scene 1 about the renaming of Tobair Vree is crucial in understanding Owen’s efforts to break away from the traditions of Ireland, while being fascinated enough to know the origins of all the place names.

Captain Lancey is a typical colonist, interested only in instigating the requirements of his government and not the local community, their history or traditions. The challenge in playing Captain Lancey is to discover what makes him tick. He may appear the closest character in the play to a stereotype. But a stereotype is not interesting to watch, so the actor playing Lancey should endeavour to look at why he acts the way he does towards the inhabitants of Ballybeg. In the final scene, does Lancey have any compassion for the innocent people whose community he threatens to destroy?

Lieutenant Yolland travels to Ireland to do his job but becomes fascinated by the culture and the inhabitants. He mentions that he comes from a small English village, Little Walsingham, which is an important piece of detail for the actor because it makes the empathy he is able to feel with Ballybeg more understandable. He suggests to Owen that he might like to live in Ballybeg, a dream many tourists to Ireland still have when they visit its beautiful rural areas. He is embarrassed by the work he is contracted to do. It would be interesting to speculate on Lancey’s view of Yolland: in reverse, Lancey reminds Yolland of his father, which would tell us something of Yolland’s traditional upbringing. His relationship with Maire is spontaneous and without any appreciation of the consequences. The ‘love’ scene in Act 2 scene 2 (called the ‘leap across the ditch’ scene in this production) should be played with great sincerity.

Although the Donnelly twins are unseen they act as interesting characters. At first, their absence from hedge school classes is linked to the disappearance of the soldier’s horses, and later they are suspected of the abduction and murder of Lieutenant Yolland. Their powerful offstage presence suggests a more aggressive resistance to the English in Ireland and anticipates the later violence of the IRA.

Billy Carter (Owen)

Photo: John Haynes
EXTRACTS FROM A REHEARSAL DIARY
by Tom Daley, Associate Director

Monday 8 August
First day of rehearsals
10am. The cast and creative team of Translations assemble in the National’s Rehearsal Room 3. First days are always strange, unnerving experiences, and there is a palpable tension in the room as each person looks out for familiar faces or makes polite conversation with members of the team. I was involved in some of the casting for the play, so I am fascinated to see who else has been cast and whether they fit my preconception. This is perhaps unfair, but it’s inevitable when you really care about a play and its characters. The cast are at the beginning of a long journey – both literally, as we tour all over the country, and in terms of the journey of discovering the Ireland of 1833.

Sean Holmes, the director, introduces himself and then we all stand in a circle to introduce ourselves. The National Theatre is a vast engine and I discover departments I’d never heard of. Then we have a model box showing, led by Sean and Anthony Lamble, the designer. This is a touring show so the set needs to be adaptable and, unlike most tours, will have to work in every conceivable type of space, from proscenium arch stages to studio spaces.

The play is brilliantly constructed – an obvious point, but it hits you with full force during the read-through. The shading of light and dark, the acuteness of characterisation, the theme of language being eroded – all these aspects of the play are deeply wrought by a master craftsman. The actors read it beautifully and Sean is visibly relieved!

There is then a discussion about the play. Sean begins by talking about the dangers inherent within any production – one being that it is easy to stage the play from Yolland’s perspective. It is a potential pitfall to romanticise Friel’s characters, so it is crucial to understand that they are normal, everyday people who happen to be caught in the middle of huge events. The read-through brought out a contemporary issue that is dominating the news headlines at the moment – the importance of assimilating into a new culture. I heard this aspect of the play more clearly and powerfully than I had done on reading it.

Tuesday 9 August
Dialect and accents

As the dialect and accent expert, Majella Hurley is a key member of the Translations team. One of the joys of working on a play at the National Theatre is the opportunity to use every resource available, and language is at the heart of this play – one of the key themes is how the richness of the language compensates for the character’s material poverty. Majella talks to the cast about the danger of sounding too urban. She quotes Friel – who said that ‘each voice has an appropriate pitch’ – and talks of the softness of the language. We listen to tape recordings of a Donegal lighthouse keeper, who articulates the various place names. Each actor is given their own tape for homework. A shared understanding of place names is important but, as in real life, there are bound to be some inconsistencies.
Soon each actor is planning their own private session with Majella!

**Thursday 11 August**

**Owen’s entrance**

I hadn’t anticipated how hard this scene is to perform. It feels very exposing because the actor playing Owen has to keep in mind two distinctive actions – to embrace the people he hasn’t seen for six years and to prepare them to meet the English soldiers. When Lancey and Yolland arrive it is fascinating to notice that the people who have the power within the room are those who can understand English. Manus is pushed further and further away by Owen’s mistranslation until he has to confront him.

There is a difficult balance to strike here for any director – capturing both the joy of Owen’s return but also the implicit tensions that are brought to the surface.

**Monday 15 August**

‘The leap across the ditch’

‘The leap across the ditch’ scene is a better title for the exchange between Yolland and Maire than ‘the love scene’. To label it a love scene is reductive because although love and lust are between the lines, what is most shocking is the stage image. It’s powerful now, and would have been overwhelming to the Derry audience of 1980 – an Irish peasant girl in the arms of a British soldier. One of the actors relates a childhood story of allowing British soldiers into her home as a young girl and being severely reprimanded by her Father for it. It’s important to recover that danger – the scale of the transgression – when playing the scene.

**Friday 19 August**

**Timeline/map**

There are many useful ways of examining the ‘back-story’ or the off-stage life of the characters. It is helpful for each actor to have as complete a picture as possible of the time frame and period through which they journey during the play. Two of the most useful methods are Timelines and Maps. Sean sets each actor the task of writing down their character’s timeline, then, as a group, we try to pinpoint the time of the most significant events of the play. It is interesting to explore the years leading up to the first moment of the play and note when Yolland’s father was born, when Hugh and Jimmy Jack went off to the battle, when Hugh’s wife died and when (and why) Owen left.

Immediately before the first moment of the play there have been a multitude of events including the christening of Nellie Ruadh’s baby; Hugh’s encounter with Captain Lancey; Owen and Yolland’s arrival and the horses being found. These events feed into the character’s ‘back-story’ and are important to talk through.

The other interesting tool for rooting the events of the play is to create a map of where the hedge school is in relation to the other key locations in Baile Beag/Ballybeg. Locating such places as Carraig na Ri, Cnoc na Mona, Anna na mbReag’s pub and Poll na gCaorach helps each actor to determine the overall picture. It also dictates the time that it would take to travel around the area.

**Wednesday 7 September**

**Run-through in the rehearsal room**

An incredibly promising run-through of the play. Sean reminded the actors of the need to keep making new, bold choices: there is no right way. This came across in the run-through: the narrative was very clear and the characterisation was acute. After the run, Sean and I agreed that one significant aspect needs to be addressed – that in this oral culture the love of story-telling and the delight in banter means that it is a cruel, quick environment...
Rehearsal Diary

where characters survive on their wits. This element could be heightened, but there is already much potential there.

Saturday 10 September
First day of technical rehearsals
Arriving in Tunbridge Wells, the first stop in our tour, we see the set for the first time. The challenge now is to turn the set, props and costumes into items with function. They can’t be mere objects but they all have to mean something and have a relationship with the performer. The other great challenge is to make the audience believe that there is a world offstage. We have been allocated two days to ‘tech’ the show – to work out and plot every technical cue. For a tour like this with different lights and equipment in each venue we need to have a strong technical plan that will work in very different spaces. Most significantly of all, we’re not just telling the story of the play but we’re recreating the atmosphere of the hedge school in August 1833.

Tuesday 13 September
First performance
A packed theatre. The striking aspect of the first half is how rich the play is. So much exposition is offered up and the audience has to adjust to so many different languages and dialects. I hadn’t heard really understood this in the rehearsal room. It’s thrilling when the audience pick up on subtle aspects of the story – there is a murmur when Owen deliberately mistranslates what Lancey says and you know that the audience are following every beat of the story.

The ‘leap across the ditch’ works brilliantly. The audience roar with laughter at Yolland and Maire straining to communicate and are then knocked sideways by the disintegration within the final Act. It’s a very difficult Act for Owen – he has to follow the disintegration moment to moment whilst coming to terms with his own part in it. That’s a huge challenge.

By the end of the evening there is a sense of relief for the actors but excitement for the creative team – we know where the play can go and we know that we have a story, a team and actors who can take it there.
DES JAMES, PRODUCER OF
TRANSATIONS

What’s your background?
I’ve been working as a director and producer for 25 years. When I started, I worked a lot with emerging writers and my passion was the development of new writing. For the past eight years I have specialised in making Shakespeare accessible to audiences of all ages, which has involved both directing and producing. It is quite good to get back to a contemporary work now. I’m excited by the challenge of getting Translations to a wide audience across the UK and in particular to younger audiences.

How did this tour of Translations come about?
The Education – or Mobile – tour is planned a few years in advance. We try to match the most suitable works to the best creative teams available. Translations fitted our brief perfectly as a wonderful play that also featured on a number of curriculum lists. It was also a play that Sean Holmes, the director, had wanted to work on for some time. The size of the cast and the single setting also contributed to the choice, as ideal for touring.

At what stage did you enter the creative process?
I was brought on board to set up the Translations tour and to facilitate the co-ordination between the National Theatre and the venues hosting the production. One of the most significant aspects of NT Education tours is their mobility, which allows the National Theatre to tour to venues and speak to audiences who wouldn’t usually get the chance to come to the South Bank or to see the Company’s larger scale tours. For me, that’s very exciting.

This tour is unusual in that it covers a wide range of different spaces – many of the venues are a completely different size. How do you see that working?
Sean Holmes and Anthony Lamble (the designer) had preliminary discussions about doing the play as a site-specific piece. One idea was to select a number of real barns and build an auditorium around each site. This was an interesting proposition but was abandoned fairly early on because of the complexity of creating a theatre space from scratch. It was also tempered by the reality of limited resources. Instead we decided to play to a number of different performance spaces – from proscenium arch stages to smaller studios and even a thrust stage – so one of the key aspects of the brief to the designer, was that we needed maximum flexibility. It is up to the director and the associate director to keep this range of venues in mind during rehearsals and to adjust the production to fit into each space.

The tour is about to begin. What do you see are the main challenges ahead?
Resources available to an NT mobile production are leaner than other productions at the National. This means, for example, that we can only take a small crew on the road and that no understudies are available for the actors. Therefore resourcefulness and team work are critical to the success of the production and tour. I am always mindful that we will have to be flexible and adapt to unforeseen problems but I am ‘trouble-shooting’ any potential problems as we go. Most productions tend to expand a little from conception to delivery, and as a producer I have to find responsible solutions to challenges in order to support the director’s vision.

Do you think Translations has dated since 1980?
No. Although Translations was premiered over twenty years ago it resounds to contemporary issues. Its central theme of how communities clash, struggle to live together and adapt to change has a universality which ensures the play’s endurance, humanity and relevance.
Interviews

JENNY HARRIS, HEAD OF EDUCATION, NATIONAL THEATRE

What are the objectives of this tour of Translations?
There are several objectives. The first is to be flexible because this tour is able to go to places throughout the UK that larger-scale productions from the Olivier or Lyttelton spaces can’t reach. We hope to discover – in partnership with the theatres that we tour to – the next generation of theatregoers. We also aim to work with English and Drama teachers to support what they're doing.

We needed to find the right play for this point in time. This is always a difficult task and we went through 30 to 40 ideas before we settled on Translations.

Why did you choose Translations?
Translations is a play about learning. This encompasses learning to speak, defining your voice, or learning the language of another culture. It features a teacher and his students and it features a man who is desperate to learn a new language and assimilate into a new culture. There are so many examples of learning. It is also a play about politics and power. I think that the idea of how different culture and ethnic backgrounds co-exist is extremely pertinent to today. It is also a play that features young people whose struggles are easy to identify with.

In terms of the more practical considerations behind why we chose this play, we could just afford to tour a play with ten characters. We also had to ask questions such as:

When was the play last performed?
Could we get the rights?
Could we match the right director to this play?
Does it fit the vision of Nicholas Hytner, the director of the National Theatre?

In all these issues, Translations seemed the perfect choice.

What do you think are the challenges ahead for this tour?
The focus of this tour is a younger audience of 16 to 30 year olds, although we welcome everyone to the theatre. We have to send this younger age group out of the theatre buzzing from the experience that they’ve just shared. We are creating theatre in a world where there is a great deal of competition for young people’s attention, from the cinema to the increase in home entertainment in the form of DVDs and the internet. We have to engage with our audience and create an exciting live event. I hope that we can create a fantastic memory of the theatre for a young person who will then return throughout their life.
WRITING A REVIEW

One of the reasons we know so little about the first performances of Shakespeare’s plays at the Globe Theatre is that in the 16th and early 17th centuries there were no theatre reviewers. Today, we have many critics writing for different magazines, but they each have a varying amount of word space in which to do the job: in a daily tabloid newspaper, the space is usually very limited, but in a Sunday newspaper or a broadsheet there is more space, so reviewers can afford to be much more analytical. Yet they all need to achieve the same goal of writing a review.

A review of a film or play needs some description of what the show is about and of its staging. It requires an opinion from the writer about what is both successful and unsuccessful about the production. This is an area in which a reviewer needs to be careful: cheap shot criticisms with clever headlines or phrases and personal criticism of an actor’s appearance are never acceptable in good writing. We often talk about the difference between constructive and destructive criticism. Irving Wardle, the great theatre critic for *The Times* newspaper, said that his rule was never to write anything about a director, designer or performer that he wouldn’t say to their face.

Adjectives should help to paint a picture in the readers’ minds, so choose them carefully as they are a vital part of the review. Look for interesting ways of describing what is good about the play and performance. If you have negative criticisms, make them constructive; explain why staging the play in this way was a bad decision by the director or writer. Consider that sometimes an actor giving what you may think is a disappointing performance, may have been asked by a director to approach the role in a specific way. It may not be the performance but the approach to the part that is the problem.

Practise

If you don’t have the opportunity to go to the theatre regularly, you can still practise by writing short reviews of a film, a television programme or a book.

Structure of a Review

1. Introduction
2. Brief outline of the plot, if necessary. It is unlikely you need to summarise the plot of *Hamlet*, but you may do with a more modern play.
3. Begin to analyse what worked and didn’t work for you in the performance. Consider directorial decisions and interpretations. What choices have been made about staging and acting? Look at actors’ performances: the physicality of the performer; the interpretation of character. If it is a naturalistic production, are they believable? Remember the use of lighting and set design in either contributing to or spoiling the effectiveness of the performance.
4. Finish by summarising your feelings towards the production and by making an overall judgement on its success.

The text of Brian Friel’s *Translations*, is available to purchase from the National Theatre’s Bookshop. Secure online ordering and mail order are available.

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Outline of the teachers’ INSET workshop
Created by Tom Daley

Participants TEACHERS
Workshop TRANSLATIONS BY BRIAN FRIEL

Aims
To elucidate Translations as a text to be performed rather than read

Content
[5 mins] Introductions.
Explain the aims of workshop and highlight practical aspect

[10 mins] Warm up exercise.
Empty chair game looking at Objective; 1-10 looking at Status

[20 mins] Aim: Introduction to dramatic exercises; starting to think of the play as drama not literature, to remind participants of the events of the play
Tableaux from everyday life – football match and classroom
Tableaux from Translations – separated into 3 groups, each given an Act
3 groups create 4 stage pictures for each Act and label each tableaux to tell the story

[30 mins] Aim: To construct a timeline of the play in order to clarify the events within it.
The whole group will be separated into 3 smaller groups.
The 3 groups will each be given an Act and determine a timeline of events in each Act.
The 3 groups will then reconvene and a spokesperson will talk through what they’ve done.
The 3 Act timelines will be stuck to the wall.

[30 mins] Aim: To construct a literal map of Baile Beag, in order to anchor the events of the play.
The whole group will again be separated into 4 different groups.
The 4 groups will go through the play and attempt to work out a ‘map’ incorporating the key locations of the play.
The 4 groups will then reconvene and examine any disparities.
The 4 maps will be stuck to the wall.

[20 mins] Aim: To examine whether translating is a reductive exercise
The group will be split into pairs.

One member of the pair will attempt to express themselves without using words
The other member will attempt to work out what is being said.
The results will be shared.

[20 mins] Aim: To better understand a character’s perspective – explain the following
Use of information from text to create drawing of character
Using text to define different research topics
Using text to create letters from characters
Using text to create diary entries
Using everything that is said about a character to better understand him/her
Using newspapers to highlight contemporary resonances of themes from the play

[15 mins] BREAK

[30 mins] Aim: To use improvisation as a way of understanding and unlocking a scene
Act 2, scene 2 – p.57-61
“O my God, that leap across the ditch nearly killed me…”
Sitting round in a circle, the group will read through the first pages of this scene.
The group will then be split up into 4 smaller ensembles.
The leader will then assign the rules of the improvisation.
The groups will prepare the improvisation around the theme of ‘the failure of language’.
The groups will then act out their improvisations.
The whole group will then read through the scene again and see what they have found out.

[30 mins] Aim: To use improvisation as a way of understanding the key events in the play
In a similar improvisational exercise, the group will determine a key off-stage event.
The leader will again set up the rules of improvisation for the 4 groups.
One of the groups will show what they have worked through

[END] Conclusion of workshop