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Brian Friel's Dramatic Artistry: "The Work Has Value"
(review)

Maria Germanou

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Donald E. Morse, Csilla Bertha, and Mária Kurdi, eds. *Brian Friel's Dramatic Artistry: "The Work Has Value."* Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006. Pp. xiv + 342. €25.00.

Brian Friel's Dramatic Artistry brings together essays written not only by English but also by German, Italian, Portuguese, and Hungarian scholars and is thus the best proof of Brian Friel's own international impact. All texts have appeared before, most of them in the *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* during the last decade. Now together in a single volume readers are invited to read these varied essays *against* each other but also *with* each other and so delineate the terrain of discussion regarding Friel's work, reconsidering older perspectives and introducing new areas of interest. This dialogic volume seems to address in a remarkable way the work of a writer who has been himself in constant conversation—with history, cultural politics, spirituality, memory, language, Ireland, Chekhov—and refuses to “give us an answer.”

Fifteen texts are divided into six sections, the headings of which have “thematic implications” but also convey “some more technical or structural considerations,” as stated in the introduction (3). The headings effectively reveal the diversity of Friel's work and highlight certain issues recurrent in the critical discourse on his work such as language (in the “Ambiguities of Language” section), or politics (in the “Politics in and of the Theatre” section). The headings also demarcate some issues that have not yet attracted the interest they deserve such as the “Disability and Empowerment” section, dealing with Friel's frequent concern with deficiency and its relation to impotence and power. Paulo Eduardo Carvalho's illuminating introduction brings out the interconnections among essays belonging to the different sections, instead of presenting them consecutively. He unsettles the categories set by the headings and invites us (justifiably so) not to be guided exclusively by the perspective provided by the headings, and therefore not to narrow down the plays' range of interpretation.

In the section “Portraits of the Artist,” *Wonderful Tennessee*, *Faith Healer*, and *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* are some of the plays that Csilla Bertha and Donald E. Morse discuss to demonstrate how they “dramatize in countless forms the artist's healing and destructive powers, as well as the artist's search for certainties, place, and function” (14). The strength of the essay lies in the breadth and clarity of its analysis regarding the identity of the artist which emerges as most paradoxical and tormented. Paradoxical because the artist has to suffer in order to be fulfilled, and tormented because his life is determined by the struggle to express himself and deal with the uncertainty surrounding the assessment of his work. Artists who are, as the essay's title says, “Restless Wanderers and Great Pretenders” constitute the preoccupation of Giovanna Tallone who reads the

early play *Crystal and Fox* and the later one *Faith Healer* intertextually, and explores their intricate metatheatrical nature. Interestingly, the critic does not see the earlier and more neglected play as paving the ground for the famous *Faith Healer*, but as a play that has a value in its own right. Thus, her approach cautions against the tendency to canonize plays in the Friel industry and asks for a constant re-evaluation.

Csilla Bertha's reading of Friel's recent *Performances* investigates the multiple meanings of performance in the theater and in daily life to explore the tension between musical and verbal performance and its reverberations in the play. Drawing upon the philosophy of music, Bertha raises significant issues such as whether music has a referential value not only in its relationship to emotions but also to language regarding each one's ability or inability to express the inexpressible, an overriding preoccupation traversing Friel's oeuvre. Her reading of a play that creates "a sublime moment" (71), effectively combining words, music, and silence, draws our attention to the imperative need to investigate further the revelatory and dominant use of music in Friel's plays.

This essay connects well with the next one from the "Ambiguities of Language" section. The possibilities of language and alternative modes of expression constitute the focus of Ger Fitzgibbon's text, which analyses in a variety of plays the ways by which the human need to overcome "existential isolation" is frustrated by the "privacy of experience and the inadequacy of language as an instrument in which to construct ourselves or each other" (89). The critic suggests that Friel offers a way out of that impasse when he resorts to music, dance, ritual, and myth, a practice that pushes the plays beyond the boundaries of language to achieve a more intuitive communication with regard to personal, cultural, and historical traumas. The much acclaimed Irish drama scholar Christopher Murray renews our understanding of *Translations*, situating Friel's most discussed play within the context of the Irish preoccupation with adaptations and translations, an activity "indicative of the peculiar, productive nature of the Irish imagination writing in English" (102). The essay is unique in that it sees the act of translation as an instance of creating a "palimpsest," a new writing imposed upon an earlier one. As a result, a form of intertextuality is produced that allows the audience to hear in this English-speaking play the language that the Irish characters did not speak, a language that was destined to erase their own, as the title of the essay "Two Languages as One" suggests. This linguistic practice poses problems to the translators, claims Márton Mesterházi. His text resonates with the difficulties emerging from his own Hungarian translation of *Translations*, difficulties increased by the unfamiliarity of Irish history for an international audience in a play in which history constructs the basic situation. By analyzing representative passages from the play, Mesterházi provides us with a renewed approach to the characters' destabilized identities, and he illustrates

convincingly that translation fails when it is not understood as a linguistic, cultural, and historical practice.

An essay on the *Faith Healer* is a fit beginning of the "Psychological and Spiritual Torments" section. Giovanna Tallone's second contribution to the volume identifies in the play an unexpected debt to medieval drama. Discussing in detail the experimental use of specific devices, she reconceptualizes the faith healer as a modern equivalent of the allegorical figure of Vice, and provides a new perspective on this much studied suffering man. Michael Parker's reading of the neglected *The Gentle Island* claims that the play's "concern with the psychic and spiritual paralysis of its characterization should not lead to ignore the deep political and cultural watermarks it so evidently bears" (170). The critic treats the prevalent sexuality in the play as a political metaphor, raising issues related to gender, language, and authority as the characters attempt to take control of the narrative. The listing of this essay in a section that implies privacy asks us—as actually does Friel's entire oeuvre—to reconsider the notion of political theater and to avoid reducing it to a theater of prescription, public issues, and unquestionable truth. Richard Allen Cave's analyses of several plays in the "Ritual and Ceremony" section explores the ways by which body language and ritual allow Friel to voice mystical experience. The critic moves beyond the thematic approach to the body and its relation to authority. Though valuable for feminist criticism and gender studies, such an approach overlooks the writer's concern with the need to investigate the possibilities of spiritual potential in post-religious, technological societies.

In the "Disability and Empowerment" section, Ruth Niel sees mental and physical deficiency in a number of Friel's plays as both a psychological and a social situation, indicative of a reality that becomes "bearable when it is understood and accepted" (216). The essay acquires its full strength in the identification of Friel's attempt occasionally to invest his disabled characters with the power to see the world differently and his refusal to legitimize the values of the healthy and the sane. Such a refusal reaches its peak in Molly Sweeney's mental breakdown as soon as she is able to see and joins the normal and healthy world of sight. *Molly Sweeney* and Friel's source for the play, Sacks's case history, are studied in Murray's second contribution. Avoiding a conventional comparative analysis, Murray demonstrates how Friel's technique of intertextuality, his use of borrowing from a discourse of expert knowledge, aims at discrediting such knowledge. Though "essential," knowledge is "useless at a certain, fundamental, level because language itself is powerless to intervene where the human spirit is engaged in relating to environment and experience" (243).

Carvalho's essay, concerned with Friel's much debated association with Field Day Theatre Company, appropriately opens the section "Politics in and of the Theatre" since, as is also evident in Brecht, what counts in political drama is not

only the content but also its function within the institutional process of its production. He identifies the power of the writer's work in the "productive tension between the private and the public paradigms" (263), an idea that runs through many essays in the volume. He also questions the common idea that sees the artist's engagement with politics as conferring an unquestionable compromise on the quality of the work. The critic treats Friel as producer and product of Irish culture and politics, moving beyond the unfruitful distinction between political and psychological drama. How mature can a political play be is demonstrated by Michael Parker's reading of *The Freedom of the City*, one of Friel's most committed plays. Drawing upon Bakhtin's notions of "parodic stylization" and "carnival" (274), the critic meticulously studies the writer's deviations from naturalistic representation and claims that the play's "concern with broader issues of authority" (273) pushes it beyond the specific historical moment of its composition. Parker implies that partiality should not be seen as equivalent with propaganda, which is actually the play's object of attack, as it dramatizes the attempt of authoritarian discourse to silence the disparate voices the play represents. Mária Kurdi's interview with the distinguished Friel scholar, Richard Pine, functions as a paradoxical epilogue: though placed at the end, it triggers even more questions, renewing our interest in Friel, as Pine himself constantly does. Notions that resonate in Friel's oeuvre run through the interview: home, storytelling, music, politics, spirituality, memory, but also Friel's relationship with Chekhov as well as other Irish writers, his Irishness, and internationalism. *Brian Friel's Dramatic Artistry* is a book that "has value." These creative and insightful essays raise broader questions about Friel's work, demonstrating that as Friel's oeuvre becomes more established and classic, it loses nothing from its initial ability to stimulate debates and be reread in so many ways by so many critics.

MARIA GERMANOU
University of Athens

Oдай Джонсон. *Absence and Memory in Colonial American Theatre: Fiorelli's Plaster*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. Pp. x + 322. \$69.95.

Oдай Джонсон's *Absence and Memory in Colonial American Theatre: Fiorelli's Plaster* is an engaging rumination on the persistence of memory, the creation of history, and the many perspectives that different ideologies can bring to the inscription of that history. Through a series of focused case studies, Johnson brings to visibility a network of theaters long absent from the American landscape.