

War of the words

Stanford's 'Translations' is a memorable look at struggle to preserve Irish cultural identity

by Kevin Kirby

Having dedicated previous seasons to dramatists such as Chekhov, Brecht and Pinter, Stanford Summer Theater pays homage this year to Brian Friel, perhaps the greatest of all contemporary Irish playwrights, who will celebrate his 80th birthday in January 2009. The series got off to a strong start last weekend with an excellent production of Friel's 1980 play "Translations."

Like the majority of Friel's works, "Translations" is set in rural Ireland and deals with issues of Irish history, culture and politics. The play challenges us to consider questions about the roles of language and mythology in preserving cultural identity, as well as more visceral questions about love, loyalty and the risks we face as we choose our way in the world.

The action takes place in the town of Baile Beag in 1833, primarily in a barn that houses the local "hedge school." Here the inebriated schoolmaster, Hugh, and his son Manus tutor the locals in math and other basics, as well as the Greek and Latin classics. One subject that is *not* taught is English; instruction is provided in Gaelic, the only language that most of the villagers know.

But the Gaelic language is under none-too-subtle attack from the English government, which is seeking ways to more easily manage the rebellious Irish populace. For one, a military detachment is conducting a full mapping survey of the country, one in which all Gaelic place names — often unpronounceable to the British — will be Anglicized for the convenience of the occupying power.

Friel's story concerns itself primarily with the socio-political ramifications of this wholesale renaming. The Royal Engineers arrive in Baile Beag in the persons of the unctuous and nasal Captain Lancey and the romantic Lieutenant George Yolland. They are accompanied by Manus's younger brother, Owen, who is serving as Gaelic translator for the English expedition in Ireland. With Owen's help, Poll na gCaorach becomes Poolkerry, and Baile Beag is transformed into Ballybeg.

The central figures in the process (and the accompanying debate) are Owen — a young man who, having once escaped Baile Beag's rural poverty, is so eager to make common cause with the English that he doesn't correct them when, for months, they call him "Roland" — and George, the project's orthographer, whose growing love for the Irish countryside and people is causing him to question his own role in this renaming of Eden.

Both Will Brill (Owen) and Will Lindemann (George) are engaging, intelligent actors, capable of capturing the excitement and the doubts associated with the project. Brill's acting burden includes

Theater Review

a mouthful of Gaelic place names, all of which sound perfectly natural in his mouth.

Also key to the story is Manus's love interest, Maire. Played by Maggie Mason, Maire is a young woman with her gaze fixed firmly on the future — a future that she believes will require her to speak English. Disheartened by Manus' poor prospects, she finds herself drawn to George. And the attraction is mutual, despite the fact that neither can understand a word the other says. Lindemann and Mason's tryst at the top of Act III is funny and touching, each one gushing "Say anything; I love the sounds of your speech!" only to have the other halt in mid-sentence with a "What? What?"

Though his intermittent drunken stagger feels slightly inorganic in the first act, Geoff Hoyle gives a splendid performance as the elder schoolmaster, Hugh. Simultaneously sharp and drink-addled, he embodies a sort of romantic Irish intellectualism that feels more affinity for the myths of antiquity than for the pull of modernization. He easily translates Homer and Virgil into Gaelic — a language which, he says, "takes on an ostentation that the lives of the people lack" — but is loath to translate a single line of verse into English, which only "succeeds in making it sound plebian."

Roselyn Hallett makes a memorable contribution as the young woman Sarah, mute until recently, who is rendered mute once more under Captain Lancey's badgering — literally robbed of her language by the British. Hallett's Irish accent, in the few sentences she does speak, is the weakest in the cast, but her non-verbal performance is exceptional.

Colorful performances are also had from Peter Finlayson as Doalty, a brash young man who harasses the Royal Engineers by covertly shifting their surveying poles, and Troy Johnson as Jimmy Jack, a sweet aging bachelor in love with the goddess Athena as described in Homer's "Iliad."

The barn that houses the hedge school is suggested by a single, slatted upstage wall, plus a number of crates and benches. These minimal elements define the space nicely without crowding the small Pigott stage. Props — the surveyors' map and books especially — have an authentic look. (The single unfortunate exception is a large, fake, red flower that reappears often enough, and in enough hands,

Also Also Weekly
War of the Worlds
(Kirby Review of
Translations, p.2)

that it must be a symbol of...something.) Lighting and sound design are simple and — despite a few glitches at last Friday's performance — effective.

Connie Strayer deserves special mention for her perfect execution of the rustic period costumes, especially the tired frock coat that seems to play a symbiotic role in Hoyle's portrayal of Hugh.

"Translations" runs through July 27, followed by the opening on July 31 of Friel's masterpiece "The Faith Healer." There is also a free series of Irish or Irish-themed films every Monday evening, and a symposium on July 19 that explores Friel's significance as a dramatist and chronicler of traditional Irish life. Details are on the SST website. ■

What: "Translations," a play presented by Stanford Summer Theater

Where: Pigott Theatre in Memorial Hall, 551 Serra Mall, Stanford University

When: Thursday-Sunday at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m., through July 27

Cost: \$20 general admission, \$15 for seniors and Stanford affiliates, \$10 for Stanford students

Info: Go to summertheater.stanford.edu for tickets and event information.