Roundabout Theatre Company

Give me your Answer, DO!

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ABOUT THE PLAY
SEARCHING FOR VALUE IN BALLYBEG

Like William Faulkner, who regularly wrote about the inhabitants of his Yoknapatawpha County, Brian Friel returns to Ballybeg time and again as the setting for his plays. A rural village in the north county of Donegal in Ireland, the fictional location can be a comfortable place. It’s a town where time seems to stop as its inhabitants enjoy an afternoon garden party. It’s a place where family and friends gather at an old house to celebrate each other’s accomplishments with a toast and a bit of song. But Ballybeg is also a place of tension and friction. It is a place where people, denying or ignoring their instability, find the earth slipping away beneath their feet. In his latest Ballybeg play, Give Me Your Answer, Do!, Brian Friel presents characters in a precarious environment in order to address some of the most poignant questions a person can ask: What am I worth? How do I determine the value of my life?

This complicated process of evaluation—the assigning of value to something—provides a significant challenge to the play’s main character, Tom, a “novelist of integrity.” Due to his poor financial situation, he has invited an archival assessor to review his manuscript collection, with the hope that he will be offered a large monetary sum to sell the archive. Suffering from a debilitating case of writer’s block that has endured for years, Tom is also looking for an affirmation of his work as a writer. Since a writer friend of Tom’s has recently sold his papers to the same appraiser for a considerable amount, Tom’s head is spinning with questions. What will the evaluator’s final assessment be? How will the monetary offer compare to his friend/rival’s payment? Will the appraiser even want to buy the papers?

Tom is not the only character that undergoes the difficult process of self-reflection. During the play, each of the characters is put in the position of questioning life choices he or she has made. For example, Tom’s mother-in-law looks at how her husband’s emotional problems may have thwarted her professional career, while Tom’s wife contemplates the musical talent she has wasted. Even the book appraiser is not above the task of self-assessment as he grapples with the tremendous demands of his employers. Ultimately, each character faces “a blend of disappointment and unyielding pressure,” as Seamus Deane (a friend of Friel’s) wrote.

The title Give Me Your Answer, Do! is derived from a popular music hall ditty, in which a young lad awaits the answer to his marriage proposal. This lyric, which underscores the theme of looking for an answer, is only one of several literary allusions Friel incorporates in the play. As a well-read writer, Tom finds himself frequently quoting other authors. Though he refers to this habit as a curse, the quotes he chooses deftly reflect his mental and emotional state. In a pessimistic moment, he recites Chekhov, “Happiness isn’t for us. Our fate is to work and work and work. Happiness is for the people who come after us.” Only a few minutes later, when discussing the gradual decline in the condition of his different homes, Tom lets his appreciation for irony show through with a wry reference to Wordsworth: “The past unsighed for, and the future sure.” At another point, Tom sings a few lines from an old hymn—“Change and decay in all around I see, O thou who changest not abide with me,”—as a way to cope with his daughter’s prolonged illness. Tom’s quotation of assorted authors is significant not only because it reflects his changing emotional state, but because that during a time when his writing is being analyzed and valued, he retreats to the words of others.

As Tom, his family, and his friends all work through their introspection, it becomes apparent that in the process of looking at one’s life, questions aren’t the problem, answers are. (cont’d on page 5)
WHO’S WHO

Tom Connolly (played by John Glover) A well-respected novelist in his fifties, who has not produced a book in some time. He believes selling his papers may help his financial troubles, but he’s unsure what other effects that might have.

Daisy Connolly (played by Kate Burton) A piano prodigy in her youth, she now has little to occupy her time except watch the bills pile up. Though she seems to always have a drink in her hand, she hasn’t lost her sensitivity to understanding those around her.

Bridget Connolly (played by Woodwyn Koons) Tom and Daisy’s daughter, who has been institutionalized for mental illness since she was twelve years old. She is visited weekly by her father, who tells her fanciful stories about the rest of her family.

Jack Donovan (played by Joel Grey) A small-time jazz piano player with a dandy side. He has a distinct distrust for things associated with the country, and is not as stable as he appears. He dotes on Daisy, his daughter.

Maggie Donovan (played by Lois Smith) Daisy’s mother, who is a retired doctor. Her arthritis increasingly is limiting her capability to get around.

Garret Fitzmaurice (played by Gawn Grainger) A writer of popular novels. Though he has produced a good number of books and received a large sum for his archive, he retains doubts about the value of his work.

Graine Fitzmaurice (played by Helen Carey) Proud of her collection of animals, her remarks to those close to her can often be very sharp and caustic.

David Knight (played by Michael Emerson) An American book appraiser, whose compulsive tendencies have left him weak at times.

Nurse (played by Nancy Robinette) Bridget’s principal care-taker.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR
BRIAN FRIEL

Even from a broad perspective, one can easily discern connections between Brian Friel's life and the themes that regularly appear in his writing. Born a Catholic in Protestant Northern Ireland in 1929 (only a few years after Northern Ireland and the Republic Ireland were formerly divided), Friel inherited the status of an outsider. The issue of Irish identity and politics has appeared in several of his plays, including Translations, Volunteers, Making History and The Freedom of the City. Friel described this theme as almost unavoidable in his work. "I feel I don't ever want to write about politics, but sometimes it happens," he explained. "I want to be more private and I want isolation, but there's a seduction of political drama, of political art." Friel achieved a political post of his own; the president of Ireland asked him to serve in the country's Senate, making Friel the only writer since Yeats to do so.

From an early age, the concept of connecting with the community and providing social service was strong for Friel. His father was a grade school teacher, and he eventually became a teacher himself. When he first entered college, however, Friel planned to become a priest. (He later said that he had to give up his seminarian studies due to his "belief in paganism.") Issues of faith and spirituality can be found in such Friel's plays as Faith Healer and Dancing at Lughnasa.

Family has also been an important element in Friel's life and writing. In 1954, he married Anne Morrison, who already had strong connections with the Friel family—Brian's father had served as best man at her parent's wedding. Brian and Anne Friel had five children (four daughters and a son), and he has been described by a friend as a tolerant and perceptive father—giving his children "the freedom to make mistakes." Several of his plays, like Philadelphia, Here I Come!, Aristocrats and Dancing at Lughnasa, are focused around families. In fact, Dancing at Lughnasa is based on Friel's mother and his aunts.

When Friel gave up teaching to pursue a writing career, theatre was not his first medium. He began by writing short stories, and developed a successful professional relationship with The New Yorker, eventually writing 14 stories for the magazine. A fan letter from the English theatre director Tyrone Guthrie changed Friel's life. Guthrie invited Friel to come to the new theatre he was establishing in Minneapolis, where Friel gained an incomparable theatre education by observing the rehearsals and operations of the theatre.

Soon after leaving Minneapolis, Friel achieved his first commercial dramatic success in 1964, with Philadelphia, Here I Come! One reason this work was acclaimed was due to its use of two actors depicting the same character. Since then, in a career spanning thirty-five years, he has adopted a variety of playwriting styles. Some plays have been realistic, yielding comparisons to Anton Chekhov or Henrik Ibsen. Sometimes, Friel has adopted more artificial and presentation techniques, such as the monologue formats of Faith Healer and Molly Sweeney.

A strong focus on language is another key element of Friel's work. As drama critic Mel Gussow wrote, "He illustrates the power of things spoken and unspoken, language as both divider and bridge." Most of Friel's plays are concerned with language, but Translations in particular addresses this subject, by looking at the period when the Gaelic places were being renamed in English.

Friel is a man devoted to the theatre. He does not write for film because, in his words, "You have no control. The writer is nobody in the cinema." His association with the theatre has taken him beyond writing. In 1980, he formed his own theatre company, the Field Day Theatre Company, with actor Stephen Rea (who has appeared on Broadway in Someone to Watch Over Me, as well as several movies such as Michael Collins, Interview With the Vampire, and The Crying Game.) At times, Friel has even directed his own plays, including Molly Sweeney at the Roundabout.

Theatre for Brian Friel is very personal. As Friel himself said, "You invent an alternative life, a fiction of your life each time you write a play." Though Friel's plays may be a "fiction of his life," they are not very far from the people and ideas that are close to him.

Give Me Your Answer, Do! premiered at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin on March 12, 1997.

Roundabout Theatre Company is proud to be presenting the North American Premiere of this, Brian Friel's latest play.
NOT JUST LEPRECHAUNS
THE CHARACTERISTICS OF IRISH WRITING

"[Contemporary Irish writers] are more concerned with defining our Irishness than with pursuing it. We want to know what the word native means, what the word foreign means. We want to know have the words meaning at all." - Brian Friel.

Ireland has a great literary heritage, having produced many writers of international renown, such as William Butler Yeats, Oscar Wilde, James Joyce, George Bernard Shaw, Frank McCourt (author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Angela's Ashes*), and Seamus Deane (Ireland's most recent Nobel Prize Laureate). For generations, writers from the "Emerald Isle," Brian Friel included, have tried to define the characteristics of Irish writing. In *Give Me Your Answer, Do!*, Friel examines this dilemma through his depiction of two novelists, Tom and Garret. Since these characters are very different types of writers—one produces novels that are challenging and complex, while the other's books are more accessible and popular—one might suspect that only one can be considered the "true Irish writer." When we explore the history and trends of Irish literature, however, we find several traditions competing with one another.

The Irish appreciation for literature is rooted in the tradition of storytellers, which stretches back to the fifth century. These early poets (or "file" in Irish) recounted and recorded the stories of mythical warriors and magical queens. Their tales also included leprechauns and other lesser-known creatures, such as dullahans (headless horsemen), gorgochs (ogres), banshees (witches), and merrows (mermaids). This storytelling tradition never disappeared entirely, but it was slowly subsumed as other cultures and languages, particularly English, came to dominate Ireland.

By the late 1800s, during a period when the Irish faced renewed political struggles and were searching again for a national identity, several writers suggested looking back to native folklore. A major proponent of this school of thought was William Butler Yeats, a poet and playwright. Yeats' work is characterized by its use of mysticism, folk legends, and heroic peasant characters. Because he felt writing should avoid references to (cont'd on page 5)

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**FRIEL'S PRINCIPLE WORKS**

<table>
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<th>The Enemy Within (1962)</th>
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<td>The Saucer and the Larks (short stories) (1962)</td>
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<td>Philadelphia, Here I Come! (1964)</td>
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<td>The Loves of Cass Maguire (1966)</td>
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<td>Faith Healer (1979)</td>
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| Three Sisters (translation from Chekhov) (1981) |
| The Communication Cord (1982) |
| Fathers and Sons (adaptation from Turgenev) (1987) |
| Making History (1988) |
| Dancing at Lughnasa (1990) |
| The London Vertigo (adaptation from Macklin) (1991) |
| A Month in the Country (adaptation from Turgenev) (1992) |
| Wonderful Tennessee (1993) |
| Molly Sweeney (1994) |
| Give Me Your Answer, Do! (1997) |
contemporary Ireland in his books and plays, has also earned praise for his intensely vivid and psychologically acute style. In contrast to these more cerebral writers, Maeve Binchy produces sentimental and warm-hearted novels about contemporary life that have attracted a large following on both sides of the Atlantic. Even the centuries-old practice of storytelling has modern day counterparts. Visitors to Irish pubs may find large groups listening enraptured to local inhabitants re-telling classic Irish ghost stories or meandering comic legends.

When speaking of the history of Irish writing then, we must acknowledge several Irish literary traditions. Some of these trends focus on the content of the writing, with native folklore contrasting with contemporary and political subjects. Others tradition highlight the style and technique of writing, especially the use of dark humor, alagical narrative construction, and the creation of strong ambiance through intense descriptions. Therefore, both of Friel's fictional novelists, despite their differences, have a claim to the Irish literary tradition. Whether as characters on stage or as real-life authors, Irish writers will probably continue to search for a definition of Irish literature, because no one interpretation has proven to hold true for everyone.

Perhaps not surprisingly, contemporary Irish writers do not fit in one mold. John Banville, who has written books about espionage and historical subjects, has earned comparisons to Joyce with his rich use of language that details everyday experiences. Banville's work has also been described as darkly comic, as has Dermot Healy's writing. Healy, who explores the contradictions of contemporary Ireland in his books and plays, has also earned praise for his intensely vivid and psychologically acute style. In contrast to these more cerebral writers, Maeve Binchy produces sentimental and warm-hearted novels about contemporary life that have attracted a large following on both sides of the Atlantic. Even the centuries-old practice of storytelling has modern day counterparts. Visitors to Irish pubs may find large groups listening enraptured to local inhabitants re-telling classic Irish ghost stories or meandering comic legends.

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ACTIVITIES
HOW DOES ONE ASCRIBE VALUE TO ONE’S LIFE?

BEFORE THE PLAY
Since one of the characters in Give Me Your Answer, Do! is asked to sell something that is close to him and his identity as a writer, think about what objects are valuable to you. These should be objects that aren’t merely expensive, but carry a lot of meaning for you. When you’ve decided on one or two objects that have value for you, think about these questions:

— Why is it meaningful to you?
— Would you miss it if you no longer had it? Why?
— Would you part with it, if someone paid you a lot of money?

DURING THE PLAY
One of the central themes of Give Me Your Answer, Do! is about asking questions and looking for answers. As you watch the play, notice how the characters ask the questions that are important to them. Things to look out for include:

— Who are they asking for an answer?
— Do they expect an answer?
— Once they get an answer, do they change the nature of their question?

AFTER THE PLAY
Write about a person who has a question. This should be a question that is important to the character, like “Am I good at my job?” or “Do other people think I’m a good person?” See if you can identify an object that would help that person determine the answer to that question. One example could be a poem about an old woman and her hairbrush. Another example could be a short story about a boy and his football uniform.

Send your finished piece to Roundabout and we’ll share it with people who are involved in the production of Give Me Your Answer, Do! (We may even post it on our website!) Send it to the attention of:
Margaret Salvante, Education Director, Roundabout Theatre Company
231 West 39th Street, Suite 1200 New York, NY 10018
or send an E-MAIL to: Margies@roundabouttheatre.org

WEBSITE: www.roundabouttheatre.org

Be sure to check out Roundabout’s website for more information on this production, the rest of our season and all of Roundabout’s activities.

SOURCES

For more information on Irish writers and their books, see also: shop.barnesandnoble.com and www.ireland.com
WHEN YOU GET TO THE THEATRE

What To Look For

The lower lobby of the Gramercy Theatre has a number of resources for your convenience. There is a refreshment counter where you can buy soda or a snack, but please remember that you will not be permitted to take these items into the theatre with you. Student discounts are available to those who show a student ID card. The lobby is also an art gallery, so you might want to have a look at the paintings we have on display.

Ticket Policy

As a student participant in Page To Stage or Theatre Access, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

Audience Etiquette

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the rest room for intermission. Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.

Thank You For Your Cooperation
And Enjoy The Show!

The Roundabout Theatre Company gratefully acknowledges the following for their generous support of our education program:

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