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PLAYS

Brian Friel
Translations



BRIAN FRIEL

Translations



faber and faber

for
Stephen Rea

Contents

Title Page
Dedication
Acknowledgment
First Performance
Note
Act One
Act Two
Act Three
APPENDIX
About the Author
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The publisher acknowledges with thanks the financial assistance of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland in the publication of this volume.

Translations was first presented by Field Day Theatre Company in the Guildhall, Derry, on Tuesday, 23 September 1980 with the following cast:

Manus Mick Lally

Sarah Ann Hasson

Jimmy Jack Roy Hanlon

Maire Nuala Hayes

Doalty Liam Neeson

Bridget Brenda Scallan

Hugh Ray McAnally

Owen Stephen Rea

Captain Lancey David Heap

Lieutenant Yolland Shaun Scott

Directed by Art O Briain

Designed by Consolata Boyle

Assisted by Magdalena Rubalcava and Mary Friel

Lighting by Rupert Murray

Field Day Theatre Company was formed by Brian Friel and Stephen Rea. *Translations* was their first production.

The action takes place in a hedge-school in the townland of Baile Beag/Ballybeg, an Irish-speaking community in County Donegal.

ACT ONE An afternoon in late August 1833.

ACT TWO A few days later.

ACT THREE The evening of the following day.

(For the convenience of readers and performers unfamiliar with the language, roman letters have been used for the Greek words and quotations in the text. The originals, together with the Latin and literal translations, appear in the Appendix.)

Act One

The hedge-school is held in a disused barn or hay-shed or byre. Along the back wall are the remains of five or six stalls – wooden posts and chains – where cows were once milked and bedded. A double door left, large enough to allow a cart to enter. A window right. A wooden stairway without a banister leads to the upstairs living-quarters (off) of the schoolmaster and his son. Around the room are broken and forgotten implements: a cart-wheel, some lobster-pots, farming tools, a battle of hay, a churn, etc. There are also the stools and bench-seats which the pupils use and a table and chair for the master. At the door a pail of water and a soiled towel. The room is comfortless and dusty and functional – there is no trace of a woman's hand.

When the play opens, Manus is teaching Sarah to speak. He kneels beside her. She is sitting on a low stool, her head down, very tense, clutching a slate on her knees. He is coaxing her gently and firmly and – as with everything he does – with a kind of zeal.

Manus is in his late twenties/early thirties; the master's older son. He is pale-faced, lightly built, intense, and works as an unpaid assistant – a monitor – to his father. His clothes are shabby; and when he moves we see that he is lame.

Sarah's speech defect is so bad that all her life she has been considered locally to be dumb and she has accepted this: when she wishes to communicate, she grunts and makes unintelligible nasal sounds. She has a waiflike appearance and could be any age from seventeen to thirty-five.

Jimmy Jack Cassie – known as the Infant Prodigy – sits by himself, contentedly reading Homer in Greek and smiling to himself. He is a bachelor in his sixties, lives alone, and comes to these evening classes partly for the company and partly for the

intellectual stimulation. He is fluent in Latin and Greek but is in no way pedantic – to him it is perfectly normal to speak these tongues. He never washes. His clothes – heavy top coat, hat, mittens, which he wears now – are filthy and he lives in them summer and winter, day and night. He now reads in a quiet voice and smiles in profound satisfaction. For Jimmy the world of the gods and the ancient myths is as real and as immediate as everyday life in the townland of Baile Beag.

Manus holds Sarah's hands in his and he articulates slowly and distinctly into her face.

Manus We're doing very well. And we're going to try it once more – just once more. Now – relax and breathe in ... deep ... and out ... in ... and out ...

Sarah shakes her head vigorously and stubbornly.

Come on, Sarah. This is our secret.

Again vigorous and stubborn shaking of Sarah's head.

Nobody's listening. Nobody hears you.

Jimmy *'Ton d'emeibet epeita thea glaukopis Athene ...'*

Manus Get your tongue and your lips working. 'My name – ' Come on. One more try. 'My name is – ' Good girl.

Sarah My ...

Manus Great. 'My name – '

Sarah My ... my ...

Manus Raise your head. Shout it out. Nobody's listening.

Jimmy ‘... *alla hekelos estai en Atreidao domois* ...’

Manus Jimmy, please! Once more – just once more – ‘My name – ’ Good girl.
Come on now. Head up. Mouth open.

Sarah My ...

Manus Good.

Sarah My ...

Manus Great.

Sarah My name ...

Manus Yes?

Sarah My name is ...

Manus Yes?

Sarah pauses. Then in a rush:

Sarah My name is Sarah.

Manus Marvellous! Bloody marvellous!

Manus hugs Sarah. She smiles in shy, embarrassed pleasure.

Did you hear that, Jimmy? – ‘My name is Sarah’ – clear as a bell, *(to Sarah)* The Infant Prodigy doesn’t know what we’re at.

Sarah laughs at this. Manus hugs her again and stands up.

Now we're really started! Nothing'll stop us now! Nothing in the wide world!

Jimmy, chuckling at his text, comes over to them.

Jimmy Listen to this, Manus.

Manus Soon you'll be telling me all the secrets that have been in that head of yours all these years.

Certainly, James – what is it?

(to Sarah) Maybe you'd set out the stools?

Manus runs up the stairs.

Jimmy Wait till you hear this, Manus.

Manus Go ahead! I'll be straight down.

Jimmy *'Hos ara min phamene rabdo epemassat Athene –'* 'After Athene had said this, she touched Ulysses with her wand. She withered the fair skin of his supple limbs and destroyed the flaxen hair from off his head and about his limbs she put the skin of an old man ...'! The devil! The devil!

Manus has emerged again with a bowl of milk and a piece of bread.

And wait till you hear! She's not finished with him yet!

As Manus descends the stairs he toasts Sarah with his bowl.

'Knuzosen de oi osse –' 'She dimmed his two eyes that were so beautiful and clothed him in a vile ragged cloak begrimed with filthy smoke ...'! Do you see!

Smoke! Smoke! D'you see! Sure look at what the same turf-smoke has done to myself! (*He rapidly removes his hat to display his bald head.*) Would you call that flaxen hair?

Manus Of course I would.

Jimmy 'And about him she cast the great skin of a filthy hind, stripped of the hair, and into his hand she thrust a staff and a wallet'! Ha-ha-ha! Athene did that to Ulysses! Made him into a tramp! Isn't she the tight one?

Manus You couldn't watch her, Jimmy.

Jimmy You know what they call her?

Manus '*Glaukopis Athene.*'

Jimmy That's it! The flashing-eyed Athene! By God,

Manus, sir, if you had a woman like that about the house, it's not stripping a turf-bank you'd be thinking about – eh?

Manus She was a goddess, Jimmy.

Jimmy Better still. Sure isn't our own Grania a class of a goddess and –

Manus Who?

Jimmy Grania – Grania – Diarmuid's Grania.

Manus Ah.

Jimmy And sure she can't get her fill of men.

Manus Jimmy, you're impossible.

Jimmy I was just thinking to myself last night: if you had the choosing between Athene and Artemis and Helen of Troy – all three of them Zeus's girls – imagine three powerful-looking daughters like that all in the one parish of Athens! – now, if you had the picking between them, which would you take?

Manus (to Sarah) Which should I take, Sarah?

Jimmy No harm to Helen; and no harm to Artemis; and indeed no harm to our own Grania, Manus. But I think I've no choice but to go bull-straight for Athene. By God, sir, them flashing eyes would fair keep a man jigged up constant!

Suddenly and momentarily, as if in spasm, Jimmy stands to attention and salutes, his face raised in pained ecstasy.

Manus laughs. So does Sarah. Jimmy goes back to his seat, and his reading.

Manus You're a dangerous bloody man, Jimmy Jack.

Jimmy 'Flashing-eyed'! Hah! Sure Homer knows it all, boy. Homer knows it all.

Manus goes to the window and looks out.

Manus Where the hell has he got to?

Sarah goes to Manus and touches his elbow. She mimes rocking a baby.

Yes, I know he's at the christening; but it doesn't take them all day to put a name on a baby, does it?

Sarah mimes pouring drinks and tossing them back quickly.

You may be sure. Which pub?

Sarah indicates.

Gracie's?

No. Further away.

Con Connie Tim's?

No. To the right of there.

Anna na mBreag's?

Yes. That's it.

Great. She'll fill him up. I suppose I may take the class then.

Manus begins to distribute some books, slates and chalk, texts etc. beside the seats.

Sarah goes over to the straw and produces a bunch of flowers she has hidden there.

During this:

Jimmy '*Autar o ek limenos prosebe* –' 'But Ulysses went forth from the harbour and through the woodland to the place where Athene had shown him he could find the good swineherd who – '*o oi biotoio malista kedeto*' – what's that, Manus?

Manus 'Who cared most for his substance'.

Jimmy That's it! 'The good swineherd who cared most for his substance above all the slaves that Ulysses possessed ...'

Sarah presents the flowers to Manus.

Manus Those are lovely, Sarah.

But Sarah has fled in embarrassment to her seat and has her head buried in a book. Manus goes to her.

Flow-ers.

Pause. Sarah does not look up.

Say the word: flow-ers. Come on – flow-ers.

Sarah Flowers.

Manus You see? – you're off!

Manus leans down and kisses the top of Sarah's head.

And they're beautiful flowers. Thank you.

Maire *enters, a strong-minded, strong-bodied woman in her twenties with a head of curly hair. She is carrying a small can of milk.*

Maire Is this all's here? Is there no school this evening?

Manus If my father's not back, I'll take it.

Manus stands awkwardly, having been caught kissing Sarah and with the flowers almost formally at his chest.

Maire Well now, isn't that a pretty sight. There's your milk. How's Sarah?

Sarah grunts a reply.

Manus I saw you out at the hay.

Maire ignores this and goes to Jimmy.

Maire And how's Jimmy Jack Cassie?

Jimmy Sit down beside me, Maire.

Maire Would I be safe?

Jimmy No safer man in Donegal.

Maire flops on a stool beside Jimmy.

Maire Ooooh. The best harvest in living memory, they say; but I don't want to see another like it. (*Showing Jimmy her hands.*) Look at the blisters.

Jimmy *Esne fatigata?*

Maire *Sum fatigatissima.*

Jimmy *Bene! Optime!*

Maire That's the height of my Latin. Fit me better if I had even that much English.

Jimmy English? I thought you had some English?

Maire Three words. Wait – there was a spake I used to have off by heart. What's this it was?

Her accent is strange because she is speaking a foreign language and because she does not understand what she is saying.

‘In Norfolk we besport ourselves around the maypoll.’ What about that!

Manus Maypole.

Again Maire ignores Manus.

Maire God have mercy on my Aunt Mary – she taught me that when I was about four, whatever it means. Do you know what it means, Jimmy?

Jimmy Sure you know I have only Irish like yourself.

Maire And Latin. And Greek.

Jimmy I’m telling you a lie: I know one English word.

Maire What?

Jimmy Bo-som.

Maire What’s a bo-som?

Jimmy You know – (*He illustrates with his hands.*) – bo-som – bo-som – you know – Diana, the huntress, she has two powerful bosom.

Maire You may be sure that’s the one English word you would know. (*Rises.*) Is there a drop of water about?

Manus gives Maire his bowl of milk.

Manus I'm sorry I couldn't get up last night.

Maire Doesn't matter.

Manus Biddy Hanna sent for me to write a letter to her sister in Nova Scotia. All the gossip of the parish. 'I brought the cow to the bull three times last week but no good. There's nothing for it now but Big Ned Frank.'

Maire (*drinking*) That's better.

Manus And she got so engrossed in it that she forgot who she was dictating to: 'The aul drunken schoolmaster and that lame son of his are still footering about in the hedge-school, wasting people's good time and money.'

Maire has to laugh at this.

Maire She did not!

Manus And me taking it all down. 'Thank God one of them new national schools is being built above at Poll na gCaorach.' It was after midnight by the time I got back.

Maire Great to be a busy man.

Maire moves away. Manus follows.

Manus I could hear music on my way past but I thought it was too late to call.

Maire (*to Sarah*) Wasn't your father in great voice last night?

Sarah nods and smiles.

It must have been near three o'clock by the time you got home?

Sarah holds up four fingers.

Was it four? No wonder we're in pieces.

Manus I can give you a hand at the hay tomorrow.

Maire That's the name of a hornpipe, isn't it? – 'The Scholar in the Hayfield' – or is it a reel?

Manus If the day's good.

Maire Suit yourself. The English soldiers below in the tents, them sapper fellows, they're coming up to give us a hand. I don't know a word they're saying, nor they me; but sure that doesn't matter, does it?

Manus What the hell are you so crabbed about?!

Doalty and Bridget enter noisily. Both are in their twenties.

Doalty is brandishing a surveyor's pole. He is an open-minded, open-hearted, generous and slightly thick young man.

Bridget is a plump, fresh young girl, ready to laugh, vain, and with a countrywoman's instinctive cunning.

Doalty enters doing his imitation of the master.

Doalty Vesperal salutations to you all.

Bridget He's coming down past Carraig na Ri and he's as full as a pig!

Doalty *Ignari, stulti, rustici* – pot-boys and peasant whelps – semi-literates and illegitimates.