

Performances *and the String Quartet n. 2 – Intimate Letters*

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Abstract: *Speculatively probing the twilight of Czech composer Leos Janacek's (1854-1928) life and career, an enthusiastic PhD student, Anezka Ungrova, cross-examines the dead Janacek – the subject of her thesis. The setting for the play is the present day when Ungrova is interviewing the deceased Janacek for her doctoral dissertation. She is intrigued by the passions of word and music embodied in this story. Of particular interest to Ungrova are the 700 passionate love letters the composer wrote to Kamila Stosslova over the last 11 years of his life and to what extent this relationship influenced and inspired his later quartets, mainly Quartet No. 2 which the composer called Intimate Letters. Janacek wrote his String Quartet No. 2 over a period of three weeks in January-February 1928. He was then in his 74th year. He died the following August. While he was composing Intimate Letters, every day he wrote extravagant, passionate, at times barely coherent love-letters to Kamila Stosslova, a married woman 37 years his junior. Performances, Friel's latest play, looks at Janacek's frantic life during those intoxicated weeks, and specifically at his obsession with Kamila and the manifestation of that passion in the themes of the Quartet. Punctuated only by the intrusion by a string quartet, Ungrova's relentless questioning of Janacek gradually assumes a shrink/patient relationship and is elevated above the tedium of mere biographical inquiry. This device allows Friel to expertly portray the broader themes of human longing and love, and their subsequent manifestations in art and music. Friel also explores the issue about the way that we tend to prefer the artist to his art and look to the life rather than the work.*

*Musical constructions abound in the work of Friel and it is not unusual to find him structuring sections of his drama after musical forms. This paper sustains that unlike other plays by Friel such as *Translations* and *Philadelphia Here I Come!* which can be considered strong political plays, *Performances* can be remembered as an impulse to combine theatre and music. However, according to critics, Friel "has written this piece with a carefree, almost reckless and disdainful attitude towards popular acclaim" which may disappoint theatre-goers who attend on the strength of his previous hit outings, such as *Dancing at Lughnasa*, *Living Quarters* or *Philadelphia, Here I Come*.*

Brian Friel was born on January 9, 1929 in Omagh, County Tyrone in Northern Ireland. Friel who is 77 years old is catholic and the most prominent playwright in Ireland in contemporary times. In addition to his plays Friel has written short stories which reflect the problems of the Irish society divided by religious problems. In approximately forty years of literary production, Friel's work encompasses radio-plays and plays staged in Ireland and London. In 1960 Friel no longer wanted to be a teacher in order to dedicate his talent to literary activities. The playwright's first work to be published is the play *The Enemy Within* written in 1962. Friel has been constantly praised by the international press, especially by politicians concerned with the socio-political and cultural problems of Northern Ireland. Friel's work is intrinsically connected with the problems of his country. In this sense, Friel does not believe in art for art's sake but as a tool of criticism of the problems he believes should be changed in Ireland. Therefore, Friel's work is a large laboratory in which the author experiments with new techniques which enrich his works and are in accordance with those used in England and the United States in the past decades. Friel made a valuable contribution to his biographers when, in one of his rare interviews drew the basic lines of his experiences:

I was born in Omagh in County Tyrone in 1929. My father was principal of a three-teacher school outside the town. He taught me. In 1939, when I was ten, we moved to Derry where I have lived since until three or four years ago. I was at St. Columb's College for five years, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, for two-and-half years, and St. Joseph's Training College for one year. From 1950 until 1960 I taught in various schools around Derry. Since then I have been writing full-time. I am married, have five children, live in the country, smoke too much, fish a bit, read a lot, worry a lot, get involved in sporadic causes and invariably regret the involvement, and hope that between now and my death I will have acquired a religion, a philosophy, a sense of life that will make the end less frightening than it appears to me at this moment. (Friel, "Self Portrait", AQUARIUS, no. 5, 1972: 17.)

Friel is the author of several plays such as *The Enemy Within* (1962), *Philadelphia Here I Come* (1966), *The Loves of Cass McGuire* (1967), *The Freedom of the City* (1973). He became a member of the Irish Academy of Letters in 1975. Friel also wrote *Living Quarters* (1977), *Aristocrats* (1979), *The Faith Healer* (1980), *The Communication Cord* (1982), *Dancing in Lughnasa* (1990) on which occasion he won the Olivier Award for Play of the Year, the Evening Standard Drama Award and the Writers' Guild Award. He staged *Wonderful Tennessee* in 1993. With *Molly Sweeney* (1996) he wins the Lucille Lortel Award and the Other Critics' Circle Award. He wrote *Give Me Your Answer Do!* in 1997, *Performances* in 2003 and finally *The Home Place* in 2005 for which he was granted the Evening Standard Best Play Award of 2005. Friel received the Saoi prize (Wise One) in 2006, the most important title to be presented to an Irish playwright.

Even before the political violence that occurred in Northern Ireland in 1969, Friel's plays center around small communities and not around the metropolis. His plays received awards in London and New York such as the Writers' Guild Award, The Evening Standard Best New Play, The New York Drama Circle Award (twice) and the Tony Award. *Philadelphia Here I Come!* staged in 1964 received an award by the Gate Theatre Productions in the Gaiety Theatre during the Theatre Festival in Dublin on September 28. It deals with the importance of the theme of emigration in Brian Friel's dramaturgy. The exit from Ireland began in the VI century when the Catholic church used to send priests to work in the convents of the continent. Later on, many young people of the more privileged social classes started to go to England and the continent to study at the universities. In the decade of 1840, thousands of people ran away from Ireland and sought residence in the United States, England, Australia and Canada due to the disastrous calamity of the potato crops. During these years, the decade of the "great hunger", the population of the country was reduced by half, in part because of the emigration and the thousands of deaths. On the second half of the XIX century, until the beginning of the XX, 70.000 Irish man, women and children went to Canada; 370.000 departed to Australia and thousands went to the United States.

For the sake of contrast it is important that we mention some facts concerning *Philadelphia Here I Come!* and *Translations* so that we can see the difference of socio-political aspects vis-à-vis *Performances* and those two plays. *Philadelphia* was considered the Best Play of 1965-66 and was the work that best contributed to make the name of Friel known internationally. This play presents the last night of an Irish boy, Gar O'Donnell, in his country town Ballybeg, before he immigrates to the United States. In *Philadelphia* Friel constructed the fictitious town of Ballybeg as stage of the action which was a town supposedly located in County Donegal. Ballybeg first appears in *Philadelphia*, a stagnant, rural backwater, full of people lost in their own delusions because of the meanness of their lives. Ballybeg is a typical small town where everybody knows each other and where the life of each inhabitant is an open book to the neighbors. The town reflects the problems that are characteristic of the other small towns of the regions. For example, there is no perspective of a better future for the young people. The more lucky ones barely manage to find work in the small and decadent business of the parents. Far from the urban centers there is no social life in Ballybeg. The young people can only go to local bars, drink beer or fight with rival groups of other small towns. The power of the church is shown through the authority of the priest who is more loyal to alcoholic beverage than to the commandments of the church. The economic and spiritual poverty portrayed by Friel in Ballybeg, as well as the lack of hope in a better future reflects, in fact, the dominant atmosphere of the whole region.

Translations was the first production presented by the "Field Day Theatre Company". The opening night was in Guildhall, Derry on September 23, 1980. In *Translations* Friel sought inspiration in the history of his country, i.e., in the political and cultural facts of the decade of 1830. The critics viewed the play favorably and many

reviewers did not hesitate to consider this play as Friel's most important work. Critics emphasize the theme of *Translations* which is the confrontation between the military and cultural imperialism and the rebellion of the province. Friel chose to report a historical time of his country which represents the beginning of the language and the culture genuinely Irish and the first signs of extinction of the Gaelic civilization as a consequence of the domination of the British Empire. The politicization of the Irish language begins quite early in Irish history. The Statutes of Kilkenny in 1366 enacted that the English in Ireland should not use Irish, or Irish customs. The Statutes also forbade intermarriage between English and Irish-speakers, though the practice still continued. These laws were the beginning of the separation of the Irish language from political power. *Translations*, an intensely political play, focus on a hypothetical situation which would have occurred in August of 1833 and which involves aspects of the process of colonization executed by the British military. It also portrays the learned Gaelic tradition of the hedge school against the developing National School system. Traditional Irish names are contrasted with official, registered English ones; unofficial, localized traditional school of Latin and Greek are compared with the new institutionalized system of education. Friel chose as scenario the town of Balle Beag, a Celtic name for the already known Ballybeg. The plot shows the arrival of officers of the British army, captains Longley and Yolland who have the mission of anglicizing the names that are contained in the maps of Ireland. Such act is an insult to the Irish character, both culturally and emotionally. Thus, we may say that language, in *Translations*, is an indication of separation, a sign of cultural and political distinction. Friel, in fact, echoes many writers on post-colonialism who see language as a means both of colonization and of subjugation. It is interesting to notice, however, that the playwright considered the Irish with a higher intellectual capacity than the British. While the British speak only their native language, several Irish natives express themselves perfectly in Latin, Greek, and English.

Performances staged in Dublin for the first time in 2003 focuses the love of Janacek for Kamila Stosslova, married and 44 years his junior. Speculatively probing the twilight of Czech composer Leos Janacek's (1854-1928) life and career, an enthusiastic PhD student Anezka Ungrova, cross-examines the dead Janacek – the subject of her thesis. The setting for the play is the present day when Ungrova is interviewing the deceased Janacek for her doctoral dissertation. Of particular interest to Ungrova are the 700 passionate love letters the composer wrote to Kamila Stosslova over the last eleven years of his life and to what extent this relationship influenced and inspired in later quartets, mainly Quartet No. 2, over a period of three weeks in January-February 1928. He was then in his 74th year and died the following August. While he was composing *Intimate Letters*, every day Janacek wrote extravagant, passionate, at times barely coherent love-letters to Kamila Stosslova. *Performances*, one of Friel's last plays, looks at Janacek's frantic life during those intoxicated weeks, especially at his obsession with Kamila and the manifestation of the passion in the themes of the Quartet.

The Czech composer Janacek was born in Hukvaldy in Moravia on July 3rd 1854. Hukvaldy now is more like a small town than the tiny village – Pod Hukvaldy – of his youth but the school in which he was born and the adjacent church are still used. At the age of eleven he was sent to the monastery school in Brno where he sang in the choir. After graduating he went back to the monastery as a teacher and deputy choirmaster, and his earliest organ and choral works date from this period. He decided to improve his musical skills with a view to a career in music and moved to Prague where he trained at the Organ School. He had become a friend of Dvorak in 1877. In 1879 he attended the Leipzig Music Conservatoire to study composition. The next spring he attended the Vienna Conservatoire but left after three months because of an argument with his music supervisor.

Janacek married one of his piano students, Zdenka Schulzova on July 11, 1881 about two weeks before her 16th birthday. He participated in the foundation of an organ school in Brno which opened its doors in 1882, with Janacek as director. Olga, the Janacek's elder child, was born on August 1882. The couple had separated for some time, but patched up their differences by mid-1884. In 1917 Janacek was holidaying in the spa resort of Luhacovice, where he met Kamila Stosslova who was 25 years old at the time. He became infatuated with her, and she was the inspiration of his late masterpieces. Over 700 letters record his affection for Kamila and his Second String Quartet called *Intimate Letters* first performed in 1928, after his death on 12th August, refers to their relationship. Janacek had no qualms the influence this simple woman had on his life. The impact of Kamila Stosslova cannot be emphasized enough considering the success of the *String Quartet*.

Musical constructions abound in the work of Brian Friel, and it is not unusual to find him structuring sections of his drama after musical forms. As early as his introduction to *The Loves of Cass McGuire* he speaks of the characters' soliloquies as "rhapsodies". He continues "to pursue the musical imagery a stage further...I consider this play to be a concerto in which Cass McGuire is the soloist". Music and dancing punctuate *Dancing at Lughnasa*, and music pervades *Aristocrats*, *Wonderful Tennessee* and *Give Me Your Answer Do!* In *Performances* music is the leitmotif of the play. The *String Quartet No. 2* intertwines the play with its *andante*, when the PhD student begins to interview Janacek, the *adagio*, the second movement, the *moderato* when the musician writes to her mistress about the lullaby that he is weaving into the quartet, and finally the *allegro* when he wrote to Kamila: "The last movement is charged with energy and defiance. But it is a movement without fear, just a great longing and something like a fulfillment of that longing." From the beginning of the play the stage directions indicate that *Performances* (beginning from its title which can be interpreted both as Anezka's performance as an interviewer and author of a thesis on the *Intimate Letters* as well as Janacek's composition of the *String Quartet No. 2*) is to be a music play and not a socio-political play as *Philadelphia* and *Translations*. The stage directions read:

Janacek's work-room in Brno, Moravia. The décor, furnishings, curtains, etc. are all in the style of the twenties. A functional bachelor's room. A piano stage right.

The composer's work-table and chair stage left. A few chairs along the back wall. These will be used later by the musicians. Two chairs and two music-stands are already in position – one chair for the cellist, placed below the piano, and one chair for the first violinist, placed below the work-table. All four instruments – two violins, viola, cello – are on stage. On top of the piano a very large bowl of lettuce leaves. A large jug of water on a small table...It becomes apparent very early that Janacek is long dead. It is important that he is played by an actor in his fifties or energetic sixties. (Friel 12)

It is clear that the action takes place in contemporary times. Anezka, the PhD student who is writing a thesis on Janacek's letters to Kamila Stosslova is late for her interview with Janacek because of "Power failure in Prague. So the computer system crashed". Therefore, instead of Ballybeg we have the metropolis, Prague. From the beginning of the play Anezka insists on the sentimental relationship between Janacek and Kamila based on their correspondence. It is clear that Friel explores the issue about the way that we tend to prefer the artist to his art and look to the life rather than the work. This becomes clear when Anezka insists that there must be connection between the private life and the public work of Janacek. Janacek inquires:

Must there?" to what Anezka responds:

O yes. Don't you think so? And I believe a full appreciation of the quartet isn't possible unless all the circumstances of this composition are considered – and that must include an analysis of your emotional state at that time – and these letters provide significant evidence about that."

Janacek is skeptical about this:

Mightn't this kind of naïve scrutiny have frightened off your little statistician?

In fact, replies Anezka, that is really the core of my thesis ...the relationship between the writing of that piece and those passionate letters from a seventy-four-year old man to a woman almost forty years younger than him – a married woman with two young sons – and what I hope to suggest is that your passion for Kamila Stosslova certainly had a determining effect on that composition and indeed on that whole remarkable burst of creative energy at the very end of your life – probably caused it – and only six months away from your death! And she continues: and I will try to show that when you wrote this quartet *Intimate Letters* you call it like that yourself when you were head-over-heels in love with her – my thesis will demonstrate that the Second String Quartet is a textbook example of a great passion inspiring a great work of art and it will prove that work of art to be the triumphant apotheosis of your entire creative life. (21, 22)

In reality, Kamila insisted Janacek destroy most of his letters to her. Briskly Janacek confesses that Kamila was forever vigilant of her good name. A slave to small-town tyrannies. Writing letters, even writing a grocery list sent her into a panic. Kamila was practically illiterate. As Janacek called her she was a woman of “resolute . . .ordinariness.”

The basic issue that Friel explores is that we tend to prefer the artist to his art and look to the life rather than the work. We have Janacek’s statement that

All you (Anezka) have in those stammering pages are dreams of music, desires for the dream sounds in the head. And those pages those aspirations – desires – dreams – they’re transferred on to a perfectly decent but quite untutored young woman. And in time the distinction between his dreams and that young woman became indistinguishable, so that in his head she was transformed into something immeasurably greater – of infinitely more importance – than the quite modest young woman she was, in fact. The music in the head made real, became carnal! Come to know no distinction between the dream music and the dream woman! Foolish old man. (34)

Intimate Letters inspired Janacek to achieve the top of his career. To initiate a romantic relationship with this much younger woman was beyond his platonic intentions. Contrary to the PhD student’s point of view, the fundamental issue in his life is not the woman herself but how she inspired him to write the String Quartet. But apart from its use of music, its interaction of different languages and in its illustration of epistemological questions, *Performances* is also typical of Friel in its components. The general frame is again that of a seemingly fruitless journey, during which the communication between the protagonist and the antagonist fails, due to the strong narcissism of one of them.

The above mentioned emphasizes the question as to why Friel decided to write one of his latest plays with such unusual indifference to politics and the Irish cause as he had done in previous plays such as *Philadelphia* and *Translations*. By many critics *Performances* can be remembered as a self-indulgent, idiosyncratic creation by an author enjoying the freedom that his notoriety and previous theatrical works of genius now afford him. We can also detect that Friel wrote *Performances* with little care to the opinion of the critics and public alike. As he himself says, listen to the music and forget the words. The critics of the “Evening Standard”, The “Daily Mail”, “The Guardian”, “The Times”, “The Daily Telegraph”, “The Sunday Telegraph” are unanimous in considering *Performances* as a hiatus in Friel’s career. They all consider that the Brodsky Quartet that plays in the play is sublime but that the play could be taken off the stage and give way to the Quartet. Furthermore, they suspect that Friel has written this piece with a carefree, almost “reckless and disdainful attitude towards popular acclaim.” “The Guardian” emphatically criticizes that Friel

offers little new here (in the play) on the theme of artist as celebrity, except Janacek’s advice to ‘listen to the music’. If only the author would let us. The

final 15 minutes of the evening, when the Brodksky Quartet is allowed to let rip an exquisite, expressive wail of longing fills the grave interior of Wiltons Music Hall, is sublime. All that goes before is so pedestrian, earnest and incompetent that I kept examining my programme to check this really was written by Friel. The impulse to combine theatre and music is a good one, but its execution is summed up in an opening scene that combines prolonged flower arranging with a musician who can't act and an actor who can't play.

Friel's abandon will, therefore, ultimately disappoint theatre-goers who attend on the strength of his previous his outings, such as *Dancing at Lughnasa*, *Living Quarters*, *Philadelphia* and *Translations*. Though many critics were negative about *Performances*, from my point of view, it is a beautiful play which may be considered as part of Friel's inner life and is a Friel's play first in its theme: his passion for music, the interaction of different languages whereby music is more important than ever, the hiatus in the career of a man already too much involved with Irish politics and socio-cultural matters which were not manifested in this play where those previous issues were ignored. Moreover, it is my opinion that in *Performances*, Friel wants to separate the author from his work as well as wishes to emphasize the distance between sentimentalism and reality. For that matter, the last stage directions read:

The quartet begins playing the last two movements the *moderato* and the *allegro*. For a long time Janacek stares after the departed Anezka [who leaves his house in a fury, screaming that Janacek is wrong about the interpretation of his relationship with Kamila]. Then he spots the green folder that she has left behind – should he call her back? He picks it up. Very slowly he turns it over in his hands and glances occasionally at the musicians. Now he opens the book [lethargically] and slowly and gently leafs through it, pausing now and then to read a line or two. Now he leans his head back and closes his eyes. Black out the moment the *allegro* ends. (39)

Works Cited

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