

Brian Friel in Spain: An Off-Centre Love Story

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Abstract. Spanish theatres are not prolific in the staging of Irish playwrights. However, the Northern Irish writer Brian Friel (1929-2015) has been a curious exception, his plays having been performed in different cities in Spain since William Layton produced *Amantes: vencedores y vencidos* (*Lovers: Winners and Losers*) in 1972. The origin of Friel's popularity in this country may be attributed to what many theatre directors and audiences considered to be a parallel political situation between post-colonial Ireland and the historical peripheral communities with a language other than Spanish: Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia; the fact is that the number of Catalan directors who have staged works by Friel exceeds that of any other territory in Spain. However, despite the political identification that can be behind the success of a play like *Translations* (1980), the staging of others with a subtler political overtone, such as *Lovers* (1967), *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), *Molly Sweeney* (1994), *Faith Healer* (1979) and *Afterplay* (2001), should prompt us to find the reason for this imbalance of representation elsewhere. By analysing the production of the plays, both through the study of their programmes and interviews with their protagonists, and by scrutinising their reception, I have attempted to discern some common factors to account for the selection of Friel's dramatic texts.

Keywords. Brian Friel, Spanish scene, theatre reception, translation, identity

Resumen. Los teatros españoles no son prolíficos en la representación de dramaturgos irlandeses. Sin embargo, el escritor norirlandés Brian Friel (1929-2015) ha sido una curiosa excepción, ya que sus obras se han representado en diferentes ciudades de España desde que William Layton produjera *Amantes: vencedores y vencidos* (*Lovers: Winners and Losers*) en 1972. El origen de la popularidad de Friel en este país puede atribuirse a lo que tanto el público como muchos directores de teatro entendieron como una situación política semejante entre la Irlanda poscolonial y las comunidades históricas periféricas con una lengua distinta del español: Cataluña, País Vasco y Galicia; lo cierto es que el número de directores catalanes que han llevado a escena obras de Friel supera al de cualquier otro territorio de España. Sin embargo, a pesar de la identificación política que puede haber detrás del éxito de una obra como *Translations* (1980), el montaje de otras con un matiz político más sutil, como *Lovers* (1967), *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), *Molly Sweeney* (1994), *Faith Healer* (1979) y *Afterplay* (2001), debería llevarnos a buscar la razón de esta diferencia en otras causas. Mediante el análisis de la producción de las obras, tanto a través del estudio de sus programas y

entrevistas con sus protagonistas, como del escrutinio de su recepción, he intentado discernir algunos factores comunes que expliquen la selección de los textos dramáticos de Friel.

Palabras clave. Brian Friel, escena española, recepción teatral, traducción, identidad.

Introduction

In theatre,¹ the correspondence between commercial success and scholarly repercussion is frequently asymmetrical, often producing a broader recognition of an author in the academic world than in the media. That said, Brian Friel (1929-2015) has been a prophet in his own country regarding the staging of his plays, which have been countless times part of the performing programme of many companies across the island of Ireland, and even in London and Broadway's theatre scene. His popularity has not decreased over the years in the English-speaking world, as the vast amount of bibliography stands witness to. Friel has also enjoyed high prestige in other European countries, some of his plays integrating the Dramaten (Sweden's National Theatre), for instance.

The situation in Spain is, nonetheless, paradoxical: Friel's plays have been on stage more often than most Irish playwrights', and this has happened across the country; however, the author continues to be unbeknown to the general public and a significant part of the theatre world. We must also acknowledge an essential difference between the various territories that conform the country: whereas in central Spain (excepting Madrid)² none of his plays have been put on, in countries like Catalonia, there is a special liking of his theatre which has led to a great number of stage productions with an extraordinary reception from criticism and audience alike, as will be seen below.

In order to provide possible explanations for such a remarkable difference, I will make use here of the concept of small nationhood as expressed by Hroch: "We only designate as small nations those which were in subjection to a ruling nation for such a long period that the relation of subjection took on a structural character for both parties" (9). In *Theatre and Performance in Small Nations*, Blandford presents Catalonia as partaking with the typical traits of a stateless small nation, a status it shares with other historical Spanish communities such as Galicia and the Basque Country. He argues that these small nations have the contention around identity as the core of not only its political life but of its cultural life:

[T]he majority of small nations are, or have been, involved in contested definitions of identity of a particularly intense nature. Frequently, especially in cases where nationhood does not bring with it the full power of the state, cultural practice becomes a crucial site where such contested definitions are played out. (3)

Theatre is the discipline in which the debate over national identity in small nations can be most productive because of its spoken nature, which brings in as central an aspect as language, but also because of the act of performing: "the act of live performance itself draws attention to the idea that identities are performed and that different versions of identity can compete for our attention or allegiance" (Blandford 3).

With a view to the exceptional representation of Friel's plays in Catalonia, this article will also address the motivations that have led the protagonists of the different performances in Spain – directors, actors and producers – to stage these texts. Through interviews with the author of this research, press documentation provided by the CDAEM³ and the digital media, an analysis will be made of both the parallels and the divergences in the conception and production of the stagings.

Irish Theatre in Spain in the Twentieth and Twenty-first centuries: an Overview

In the years before the Spanish Civil War, the first Irish play to be translated into Spanish was Synge's *Riders to the Sea* (1904) by Juan Ramón Jiménez and Zenobia Camprubí in 1920. Some of the writers who belonged to the 27 Generation, like Jiménez, admired the work of the authors who formed part of the Irish Literary Renaissance because of the use they made of Irish folklore. An outstanding example is García Lorca's interest in Synge's dramatic work, which, according to De Toro, was an inspiration for *Bodas de Sangre* (9).

Synge, Yeats and Lady Gregory's "Irishness" and their importance in the Irish Literary Revival determined the reception of their works in the Spanish regions that could be described as "small nations", an experience shared by other small nations in Europe: "The Irish Literary Revival became the subject of keen interest of intellectuals in small nations suffering from oppression, particularly in Galicia, the Basque Country, Catalonia, the Czech Lands and Poland, being perceived as analogous to their own struggle" (Pilný 216). Thus, Lady Gregory and Yeats' *Cathleen Ní Houlihan* (1902) was translated into Catalan in 1921, into Galician the same year and into Basque in 1933. Yeats' *Land of Heart's Desire* was translated into Catalan in 1927 (De Toro 17-29).

Despite the interest seen in these translations and the reviews which appeared at the time in Spanish newspapers and journals, this did not result in the staging of any of these authors' plays. De Toro reveals Lorca's interest in performing Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* with his company La Barraca, although, due to the War, this never happened:

[Lorca] le informa de que la Barraca [...] tiene la intención de representar el drama de Synge que él traduce como *El farsante del mundo occidental* [...] la guerra fratricida de 1936 que tuvo lugar en España y el posterior asesinato de García Lorca en Granada puso fin a todos sus proyectos y dicha obra de Synge nunca fue representada por La Barraca. (10)

As can be seen in Merino-Álvarez, more than two hundred plays from Irish playwrights were given permission to be translated and performed during Franco's dictatorship (1936-1975) (441). Beckett, Wilde and Shaw had fathered two-thirds of all the productions, nonetheless, these authors were not regarded as Irish: "[Wilde and Shaw] were considered (and labelled) 'English' rather than 'Irish' and given their well-established status in Europe, they were not deemed dangerous by censors on the whole" (441). Beckett's filiation was more international, as he "is labelled 'English', 'French' or 'Irish'" (442). The tendency detected on the first years of the twentieth century regarding the playwrights belonging to the Irish Literary Revival, enlivened from the 1960s, as can be noticed in the number of translations effected into Galician and Catalan:

In the late 1960s and 1970s, productions in Galician and Catalan were staged because of their inherent "Irishness" or the accompanying political connotations [...] In Spain, Irish authors were chosen for reasons of both ideology (O'Casey) and identity (Synge, Yeats), and were instrumental in establishing a struggle in favour of nationalism (and political change) in Galicia, Catalonia and the Basque Country. (Merino-Álvarez 442-446)

From the 1960s to the first years after Franco's dictatorship, until 1980, there are records of the staging of plays by Brendan Behan (three), Sean O'Casey (five), Synge (five), and Beckett (eleven). The latter has experienced a surge ever since, with more than a hundred

productions of his plays registered in the CDAEM and the CDMAE⁴ archives, which evidences Beckett's status as an international classic.

However, when observing the number of productions of Irish plays from the 1980s onwards, there are some details to be noted: Behan and O'Casey have disappeared from Spanish theatres, Synge has been staged twelve times – mainly in Catalonia and Galicia – and new names have been added to the list. The new incorporations are Brian Friel, with twenty-nine stage productions, Martin McDonagh (an Anglo-Irish playwright whose dramatic oeuvre has been labelled as Irish by Spanish directors from the very beginning) with nineteen, Conor McPherson, with seven, and Marina Carr, with one. Therefore, Brian Friel is the most frequently represented author on the Spanish scene in recent years excluding Beckett.

If we take a look at the territories where the abovementioned productions have been staged, the tendency is similar for most of them: Behan and O'Casey have been performed solely on stages in Madrid – probably because, as Merino-Álvarez pointed out, their theatre addresses political rather than identity issues since their plays can be seen as an indictment on social injustice. Synge has been predominantly present in Madrid, Catalonia and Galicia; Martin McDonagh has been produced mostly in Catalonia and Galicia, with only three performances in Madrid; to date, Conor McPherson's plays have only been performed on Catalan stages; as for the sole production of Marina Carr's play, it was put on in Madrid. Brian Friel's plays, as already mentioned, have had a high number of productions in Catalonia, although they can also be found in Madrid, Galicia, the Basque Country, Navarre, Valencia and Andalusia, which seems to indicate that Friel's dramaturgy is more appealing to theatre professionals throughout the country.

In short, we can conclude that Irish theatre has not enjoyed much representation on the Spanish stage in the last two centuries if we exclude Wilde, Shaw and Beckett, who are not seen as Irish by the majority of the Spanish theatre professionals. The more contemporary playwrights have not been very popular either. However, Brian Friel's plays constitute an exception to the previous statement.

Productions of Brian Friel's plays in Spain: 1972-2018

The CDAEM and CDMAE archives have documented twenty-nine productions of Friel's plays in Spain, albeit many are different stagings of the same text, frequently varying in language. In order to compare the motivations behind the selection of these plays, the productions will be shown in sections according to the original text, even if this means not following a chronological order. However reasonable it may be to expect as many motives behind the choice of Friel's texts as companies put them on stage, when they are thus grouped, the parallels are revealed, helping to establish a general pattern.

Lovers: Winners and Losers (1967)

Teatro Experimental Independiente (T. E. I.) was the first company to stage a Friel's play in Spain, as early as 1972. It was directed by William Layton, Arnold Taraborrelli and Pilar Francés and it premiered in Pequeño Teatro Magallanes theatre in Madrid. The CDAEM archives own two reviews by Moisés Pérez Coterillo, who provides an explanation of the reasons of the company for staging *Amantes: vencedores y vencidos (Lovers: Winners and Losers)*, namely, that the choice obeyed to the company's need to comply with the bourgeois sponsors' very conservative desires (103). However, the critic seems to fall into a contradiction, considering the harsh criticism that this play makes of the Catholic Church – one of the pillars of the still existing Francoist dictatorship.

Ten years later, in 1982, the Galician director Eduardo Puceiro Llovo, who had studied at the T.E.I. laboratory with William Layton, staged this play with the company Itaca under the name *Amantes*. It premiered in Pontevedra, and then toured all over Galicia for two years. He pointed out the quality of Friel's text, full of beauty and a subtle sense of humour in the first part that becomes acidic, sarcastic and full of black humour in the second part, to account for his selection of the play (Programme of *Amantes*). No mention was made of the similarities between Galician and Irish culture or history, which suggests that Layton's influence could have been a more determining factor.

***Translations* (1980)**

Pere Planella, the Catalan director who staged *Agur, Eire... agur* (the Basque version of *Translations*, which premiered in San Sebastián in 1988) exposed a very straightforward motivation for his choice. As can be read in the programme, in his opinion, the play spoke directly to the people of the Basque Country at that particular moment since the historical circumstances which appear in it had surprising parallelism with the historical and current reality of the Basque Country. He also explained that, as a Catalan, he had experienced a similar context (Programme of *Agur, Eire... agur*). Planella was referring here to the efforts of the Francoist dictatorship to obliterate the languages spoken in the Spanish small nations – Catalan, Basque and Galician – and whose consequences were being experienced to that day.

This is the first reference to the historical and political parallels between the playwright's homeland and the target audience, although it will not be the last. The Abbey Theatre brought *Translations* to Catalonia's National Theatre in 2001 as part of an exchange programme between both theatres. This was an English version with Catalan subtitles. In the criticism which the play received in Barcelona, the idea of parallel situations is very frequently mentioned, as can be seen in Massip's article: "[...] una cantarella que el colonialisme espanyol ha taral·lejat als pobles que subjuga des de l'establiment de l'educació pública a finals del segle XVIII" (a song that Spanish colonialism has sung to the people it has subjugated since the establishment of public education in the late 18th century) (39). Furthermore, to emphasise the interpretation of the play from a Catalan perspective, the advertisements designed for the premiere made use of a quotation from Raimon's song "Jo vinc d'un silenci":⁵ "Qui perd els orígens, perd la identitat" (If you lose your origins, you lose your identity). The performance received considerable attention from the press and was very successful commercially speaking, with full houses at all shows and a long, heartfelt ovation the day on which I attended. The company's actors believed that the Catalan audience had grasped the meaning and tone of the play, in contrast to audiences in American cities where they had performed before (Gaviña-Costero 410).

Ferran Utzet, responsible for the first staging of this play in Catalan, *Traduccions*, which premiered in Barcelona in 2014, also compares the political situation of Catalonia at the time with the one reflected in the Irish play. Let it be said that the Spanish Minister of Education, José Ignacio Wert, had advocated, only two years before, for a higher influence of the Spanish language on Catalanian schools, with the very controversial expression of "españolizar Cataluña" (Aunión n.p.). The situation described in the play, with the British sappers changing the toponyms from Gaelic to English and the British Crown founding national schools all over Ireland in which only English could be used, seemed very familiar to both the director and the company (Interview with Ferran Utzet, 17 July 2020). As a matter of fact, González-Casademont points out at the political moment to account for the critical and commercial success of this production:

This may be partly due to extra-theatrical factors, in particular a socio-political juncture which has intensified the centrality of language in Catalan culture [...] the notion of Catalan as the main identity marker has been foregrounded in the wake of the central government's recent offensive against Catalonia's educational model. (126)

Utzet, nonetheless, expressed his mistrust of any straightforward identification since he perceived elements in the text which were far more thought-provoking and appealing, as was the love for knowledge, the value of education, the conflict between progress and tradition, and how people react to misfortune with empathy – elements he tried to highlight in his version of the play:

[Interviewer] Regne Unit, Irlanda, substitució d'una llengua. Sona proper, tot això:
 [Utzet] Sí, però no és la base de la proposta. Evidentment ens podem sentir identificats, però en realitat el conflicte esclata per l'etern diàleg entre progrés i tradició. També hi ha una història d'amor impossible, i un altre amor, pel coneixement, pel paper i el valor de l'educació. I per sobre de tot, explica com les persones viuen moments decisius amb profunda empatia. (Ferré 77)

Utzet's reading of *Translations*, although mainly faithful to the original text, introduced a narrator to contextualise the historical and social period for the Catalan audience. This narrator was represented by the same actor who played Yolland, the English sapper who falls in love with Ballybeg. This element, in my opinion, distorts the fluidity of the performance, interfering with its rhythm, and does not add any significant knowledge to the play. Considering the enthusiasm with which the Catalan audience had responded to *Translations* in English and without prior contextualisation in 2001, the superfluity of the narrator becomes evident.

Dancing at Lughnasa (1990)

In 1993, Pere Planella directed a Catalan version of the play which had been so successful in London. It had been suggested to him by Guillem J. Graells, who had seen the play performed by the Abbey Theatre. Graells translated it into Catalan and, under the name of *Dansa d'agost*, it premiered at the Teatre Lliure, becoming an instant commercial and critical success (with a high number of enthusiastic reviews) of lasting influence over theatre practitioners in Catalonia, with six different productions of the same translation effected by Graells in 1998, 2000, 2001, 2002 (two the same year) and 2005. In an article written on Brian Friel's demise, one of the most influential Catalan theatre critics referred to *Dansa d'agost* as one of the Teatre Lliure's greatest successes, a show which he had seen on many occasions and had made him immensely happy: “[...] em vaig empenyar [...] quan vaig llegir aquesta necrològica de l'irlandès en que se silenciava l'extraordinari muntatge de Pere Planella ... que em va fer feliç, immensament feliç” (Sagarra 6).

In an interview (Gaviña-Costero 365-72), Planella acknowledged that he decided to stage this play, first, because of his previous contact with the author, which convinced him of the quality of the text. Besides, he was fascinated by the playwright's capacity to move the audience with his dramaturgy since for the director, theatre means catharsis, and this play can provoke both laughter and weeping. Furthermore, Planella believed that Friel was a very effective playwright for several reasons: the condensation of the action, perfectly constructed, round characters, the creation of a realistic atmosphere which is also completely personal and the description of a specific rural area which becomes universal.

The same year, although some months later, saw a staging of the play with the text in Spanish, *Bailando en Verano*, directed by Luis Iturri and premiered in Bilbao. In this case, the responsible of the selection was the producer Salvador Collado – at the time, director of the Teatro Maravillas in Madrid –, who had seen the Abbey Theatre’s show in London, where it had been running for a year and a half. He was highly interested in producing what, for him, was to be a commercial success. He contacted director Luis Iturri – then director of the Teatro Arriaga in Bilbao –, who was excited by the idea of staging a play by the same author as *Agur, Eire... agur (Translations)*, of which the director held a very favourable opinion after having seen it at the Teatro Arriaga. Apparently, in this case, the quality of the text was far less decisive than the possible commercial exploit. The selection of the cast was based on the popularity of the actors, regardless of their ages – something which resulted in a flaw of the verisimilitude and, in all probability, in a less emotive reception on the part of the audience than the one received by *Dansa d’agost* (Gaviña-Costero 381). Nevertheless, Collado’s goal was, in part, attained and the production toured through several cities in Spain.

Director Juan Pastor, who had known about Brian Friel from the time when he was one of Layton’s disciples at the T.E.I., decided to translate *Dancing at Lughnasa* and stage it as a degree final project for the ESAD (the School of Dramatic Art in Madrid) of which he was a teacher. This first production, in 1997, received the name *Bailando en Lughnasa*. He used the same translation for his second production with his company, Guindalera Escena Abierta, in 2000. Pastor based his choice on the coincidence of sensitivities between this text and his vision of life. For him, Friel was a very good connoisseur of the human soul (Gaviña-Costero 395). He deemed *Dancing at Lughnasa* a delicate play, where the non-spoken part becomes more important than dialogues. For him, this play was about memory, with the softness and melancholy that tarnishes all remembrance, and its verity. Pastor found magic in the play, with the suspension of memory producing a feeling of the numinous in the audience. In an article published at the time of the premiere, the director stressed the poetic sensibility of the play and the compassionate way in which the playwright draws characters trapped in their domesticity and cut off from their past:

Su estilo rezuma una gran sensibilidad poética. Trabajar con sus obras ayuda a que nuestras percepciones se agudicen llevándonos a una reflexión más profunda de la condición humana. Además retrata maravillosamente las profundas ironías y contrastes de nuestra época [...] evoca un paisaje interior de un grupo de seres humanos atrapados en sus problemas domésticos y lo hace de una forma conmovedora, auténtica y compasiva, delatando entre otras cosas la necesidad del ser humano ante su desarraigo de mantener unos lazos vitales con su pasado. (Pastor 100)

Pastor put on the same play in 2009 as a part of a cycle dedicated to Brian Friel at Guindalera theatre in which three of his texts were staged: *Dancing at Lughnasa*, *Molly Sweeney* and *The Yalta Game*.

The next readings of the plays were performed in Catalonia, all of them based on Graells’ translation, and by amateur Catalan companies. We would have to wait until the year 2016 to witness a staging of the play by a professional company and with a new translation into Catalan, effected by the director of this version, Ferran Utzet. He kept the same name given by the Teatre Lliure’s play, *Dansa d’agost*. Although Utzet had not seen Planella’s version, he acknowledged the long-lasting influence of the Teatre Lliure’s production on the Catalan audience (Serra 32). In an interview with the author of this research (17 July 2020), Utzet admits that he had seen a Brazilian version of this play some years before undertaking the staging of *Traduccions* and felt inspired by the proximity between the Brazilian approach to spirituality and the Irish one displayed in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. With this show, the

director intended to close the cycle dedicated to Irish theatre which the company La Perla 29 had commenced in 2014 with Friel's *Translations* and continued with McPherson's *The Weir*. At the moment of the interview, nevertheless, he had premiered Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, his third Irish playwright, and this led him to sense in the three authors a common dramatic intelligence and finesse which he presumed that resulted from what he called "the gift of the literary talent with which the Irish people were endowed". In his opinion, the three dramatists displayed deep sympathy and understanding for human nature.

Utzet's rendition was very close to the spirit of the Abbey Theatre's performance, with its comic outbursts amid tragedy and its musicality. He declared in the interview that the company travelled to Glenties, the Donegal town that inspires Ballybeg, and there they soaked up the atmosphere and the people, even attending amateur theatre performances to learn from the actors, which would account for its proximity to the Abbey's version.

***Faith Healer* (1979)**

Xicu Masó, a Catalan actor and director, was one of the many who had been enraptured by Planella's *Dansa d'agost* in 1993. In an interview (Gaviña-Costero 422), he acknowledged that Friel had produced such an impact on him that he had intended to stage *Translations* with his company El talleret de Salt several years later. However, the play never saw the light and it was only when Ernest Riera, the translator, proposed *Faith Healer*, that Masó decided to stage a text by Friel. The play was entitled *El fantàstic Francis Hardy* and premiered in Barcelona in 2004. The text had captivated the director because he felt a very close sensibility between the Irish playwrights and the Catalan character – in fact, Masó's previous show for the Romea theatre had been precisely the play *Sota the til.ler (This Lime Tree Bower)* by Connor McPherson. For Masó, the Catalans and the Irish shared the same kind of humour: biting and caustic. It should be noted here that while Planella and Utzet had defended the identification of the Catalan audience with the Irish people on account of their common colonial past, Masó focused on the similarities he found between the Irish and Catalan personality.

Friel was, according to the director, a great playwright with a Shakespearean style. In his opinion, everything in *Faith Healer* was outstanding: its structure, the location of repetitions, the amount of information given to the audience, the way each monologue varies subtly and the reasons behind those variations. He also valued the issues with which the play deals: the crisis of talent, the loneliness of the misunderstood genius together with the pain of those who, despite their love for him, are unable to help, the narcissist and selfish nature of artists and the need to create an alternative reality to make life bearable. However, Masó was also aware of the difficulty of this text for the Catalan audience, since the Irish technique of storytelling has no tradition in the country; he, therefore, reduced the length of the play (originally two hours and a quarter) by half an hour, eliminating a few paragraphs in each monologue.

Juan Pastor staged the play with his company in 2012, using a name quite like that of Masó: *El fantàstic Francis Hardy. Curandero*. In the programme, Pastor elaborated on his opinion about the text, highlighting the subjectiveness of truth and the crucial role of perception and memory in the development of the plot. He believed that the audience was the fourth character in this play, since they must interpret all they hear to extract their particular truth (Programme of *El fantàstic Francis Hardy. Curandero*). This reading of *Faith Healer* suffers from the same malady as other productions of this company: the actors were too young for the role. This is a consequence of the personality of the Guindalera company, generally a project for actors who are just beginning. However, the depth of the events narrated in the play requires more mature performers and, unfortunately, the youth of the

actors in this production incapacitates them to convey the existential anguish that pervades the play.

Afterplay (2001)

On the first centenary of the death of the Russian playwright Chekhov in 2004, the Gayarre Theatre, in Pamplona, decided to honour him with Friel's *Afterplay*. The play features two characters from two Chekhov's plays – Andrei Prozorov from *The Three Sisters* (1901) and Sonia Serebriakova from *Uncle Vanya* (1898) – and it is one of the three texts which make up *Three Plays After* (2001), all of them based on Chekhov's work. This production received the name of *Después de la función* and was directed by Ignacio Aranaz. At the press conference given before the premiere, Aranaz justified his choice by the intellectually ambitious, meta-theatrical game posed by the text (Gorostiza 11).

This arguably minor play⁶ has become, nonetheless, Friel's second most performed on Spanish theatres so far, after *Dancing at Lughnasa*. There is undoubtedly an economic reason behind its popularity since it only requires two actors, and the set is not excessively demanding. Yet, a remarkable aspect of the 2006 production is that Blanca Portillo, a leading actress in theatre, television and cinema in Spain, was one of its main instigators. The play retained the original name, *Afterplay*, and has certainly been the most commercially successful of all versions, besides having received considerable critical attention, as evidenced by the high number of reviews in major newspapers such as *El País* – with a feature on Blanca Portillo –, *El Mundo*, *ABC*, *La Razón* and *La Guía del Ocio*. According to the press conference held by the actors and the director, the responsibility for the choice of text lay with Juan Caño, the translator. None of the four people directly involved in the production – actors, director and translator – had seen or even known about the previous Spanish version by Aranaz, as reflected in the articles written on the show. Apparently, Caño decided to translate the play after attending its premiere in London in 2002. The fact that the original title was kept could explain why all the protagonists of the production, together with the media, considered this performance as the first staging of *Afterplay* in Spain, as can be seen in one of the first reviews: “[S]e trata de un estreno absoluto del que llevamos meses hablando en los mentideros teatrales de la villa porque es un proyecto conjunto de tres pesos pesados [...] de la escena española” (It is an absolute premiere that we have been talking about for months in the town's theatrical talking shops because it is a joint project by three heavyweights [...] from the Spanish scene) (Torres, “Pasión” 55).

According to his testimony, Caño proposed the text to the actors, Blanca Portillo and Helio Pedregal, who in turn convinced Carlos Plaza to direct them. The actors and the director developed their motivation at the aforementioned press conference; however, the fact that both Pedregal and Plaza had studied and taught at T.E.I., with William Layton, the first director to stage one of Friel's plays in Spain is, in our opinion, an element to be highlighted, albeit unnoticed by the press. All three mentioned the relationship of the text with Chekhov's theatre, although very little was said about the real author of this play (Torres, “El teatro” 44). The director commended the play for its humanity and its Chekhovian sense of humour (Torres, “Pasión” 55). In another interview, Plaza also elaborated on the dramatic complexity of the text, as well as the universality and depth of its themes (Ayanz 41).

Three years later, in 2009, a Galician version of the play premiered in A Coruña, directed by Xúlio Lago and with the original title, *Afterplay*. This piece, however, was one of the two plays that made up the show, the other being *O xogo de Yalta* (*The Yalta Game*), with which the Teatro do Atlántico company celebrated its silver jubilee. The director and the company intended to honour both Friel and Chekhov, as can be seen in the headline of the review published on the occasion of the premiere: “Teatro do Atlántico cumple 25 años con

su homenaje especial a Chéjov y Brian Friel” (Teatro do Atlántico celebrates its 25th anniversary with a special tribute to Chekhov and Brian Friel) (Mato 67). As reflected in the article, the discovery of Friel’s play enabled the company to fulfil its long-standing desire to perform a Chekhov, which had been postponed due to its high cost. *Afterplay* was the solution, since, in the director’s opinion, it adapts the world of Chekhov’s plays in a beautiful manner (Mato 67).

Afterplay, under the same name, was also translated into Catalan and premiered in 2013, although after a curious turn of events. A very popular Catalan actor, Ferran Rañé, bought the rights to perform the play after having seen Plaza’s version in Madrid in 2007. For various reasons, he did not put it on, giving them to the Catalan actress and director Imma Colomer instead. When she applied for financial support for the production, she found out that Blanca Portillo was taking her play to Barcelona on the very days Colomer’s was to be performed and that it would be in season there; therefore, although Portillo’s production never reached Barcelona in the end, Colomer abandoned the project. Then, in 2012, the actress Fina Rius asked Colomer to direct her in a play with few characters due to their extremely low budget. The director showed her *Afterplay*, which captivated Rius. Both were familiar with the plays by Friel which had been performed in Catalonia and had seen *Dancing at Lughnasa* and *Translations*. The production, which premiered in Terrassa, was a great success, as evidenced by its two-year tour around Catalonia. The translator into Catalan was Jordi Fité, who had also translated Friel’s *Molly Sweeney*, performed two years earlier.

The last staging of this play so far was the first to show Friel’s work in Seville, in 2017. The title changed slightly, now being *After Play*. It was the first production by the Perro Negro company, made up of two young Andalusian actors, although the director, Roberto Quintana, is a well-known actor and director in Andalusia. As the actors revealed, their first intention had been to stage a text by Chekhov when Quintana proposed Friel’s play, of which he had known through hearsay (Díaz). In the production programme, the director states the reasons for his decision, based on the quality of Friel’s dramatic writing: he had been fascinated by Friel’s text, in which the characters spoke in the Chekhovian language of their “yesterday’s world” (Programme of *After Play*). In his opinion, Friel is one of the best Irish playwrights of all time, and he underlines his ability to reveal the complexity of human relations by universalizing their conflicts through simple, quotidian writing, which is, however, precise and accurate.

***Molly Sweeney* (1994)**

The 2005 version of *Molly Sweeney* at the Teatre Micalet has been the first and only performance of a text by Friel in Valencia. It was also the first time that this play was staged in Spain. The instigator of the production was Pilar Almería, a popular Valencian actress and one of the founders and shareholders of the Teatre Micalet company, a benchmark for Catalan language theatre in the city of Valencia. The actress had seen *Dansa d’agost* at the Teatre Lliure in Barcelona and looked for texts by the same author. *Molly Sweeney* moved her extraordinarily, but it took her two years to convince the company to bring it on stage. As she declared, she was fascinated by Friel, and passed on her enthusiasm to her colleagues (Gaviña-Costero 445). Joan Peris directed this production which had Javier Nogueiras as the translator into Catalan. The local media transcribed the director’s opinion on the text, expressed at a press conference before the premiere. In it, he described *Molly Sweeney* as truly intimate, decidedly theatrical, thought-provoking and deeply introspective; he also displayed his enthusiasm for the beauty of the metaphors and the play’s ability to surprise (Agencia Efe). The production was a critical and commercial success, with full houses at all shows and

long-standing ovations. It was simple and deeply moving, mainly because of the outstanding rendition of the characters by the actors.

As mentioned above, Juan Pastor included *Molly Sweeney* in the cycle of Friel's plays programmed by the Guindalera Escena Abierta company in Madrid in 2007. In the printed programme for the performance, he reflected the merits that led him to include the text in the company's repertoire: the poetic quality of Friel's writing and the interest which the theme of the play would certainly provoke in the audience (Programme of *Molly Sweeney* by Guindalera Escena Abierta). Once again, the youth of the lead actress for the role of Molly Sweeney, a woman in her forties who had lived a satisfactory life until her husband convinced her to have an operation to recover her sight, hinders the emotion of the audience, which cannot fully grasp the tragedy of the situation.

In 2011, following the example of other Spanish directors, Xicu Masó turned to Friel for the second time, only, on this occasion, he was one of the actors in *Molly Sweeney*, a production directed by Miquel Górriz and premiered in Girona. This staged performance was, nonetheless, the result of a five-year ambition of a group of theatre practitioners who had been working together in many previous shows – thus, the character of Molly Sweeney was played by Míriam Alamany, who had also performed in *El fantàstic Francis Hardy (Faith Healer)* with Xicu Masó as both director and actor – and the translator, Jordi Fité. At the press conference for the premiere, Górriz admitted the impact that seeing *Dansa d'agost (Dancing in Lughnasa)* had caused him some years earlier: “La impressió va ser tal que, acabada la funció, em vaig tancar en un servei i vaig plorar” (The impression was such that, after the show, I locked myself in a toilet and cried) (Chicano, “Ajuts” n.p.). While the identification between Molly's forced healing and the British colonisation of Ireland, which is commonly found in the academic interpretation of the play,⁷ had not been mentioned by the protagonists of the two previous Spanish productions, Górriz highlighted this aspect when he suggested that the text could be interpreted as the story of the destruction of a people's identity (Sorribes 62). He also mentioned other issues present in the play, pointing out Friel's poetic writing, as previous directors had done, along with the ethical implications of science and the way we understand individual identity (Chicano, “Història” n.p.).

Although the 2005 version of *Molly Sweeney*, by the Teatre Micalet company, had been in Catalan, the one discussed here, also in Catalan, made use of a different translation. The translator, Fité, relates in the programme how he came into contact with the play staged in London in 1994 and was impressed by it. He further describes in detail what he considers to be the most powerful assets of *Molly Sweeney*: the subtle metaphorical quality of the story, the unexpected and moving conclusion, its inspiring dramatic structure and how it makes the audience aware of the close relationship between altruism and selfishness (Programme of *Molly Sweeney* by Bitó Produccions). The translator's opinion of the play is relevant in this case for two reasons: firstly, because he was one of the promoters of this production, and secondly, because his interest in Friel was reflected in his collaboration with Imma Colomer in *Afterplay* two years later, as mentioned above.

The Yalta Game (2001)

Juan Pastor staged this piece from *Three Plays After* to open the cycle dedicated to Friel by the Guindalera company in 2007. The production, entitled *El juego de Yalta*, was revived as a tribute to the playwright after his death in 2015. It is one of the company's favourites, especially since it was awarded the ADE (Association of Stage Directors) prize for best direction in 2011. The translation was carried out by Pastor, who also published it, together with some notes on the production, in the ADE journal. In these, he signalled that the play was about the meaning of love and celebrated its capacity to touch the heart through

imagination, in contrast to the coarseness which he believed to be omnipresent on the Spanish stage. The director saw the relationship between Friel and Chekov as something that went beyond the former's use of the latter's story as a starting point for the play; for him, *The Yalta Game* was the work of two mature artists whose sympathy for human frailty was undeniable (Pastor 146).

The Yalta Game, as mentioned above, was, together with *Afterplay*, staged by the Galician company, Teatro do Atlántico, in Galician language, directed by Xúlio Lago under the name of *O xogo de Yalta* on the occasion of the company's 25th anniversary in 2009. This play, however, received considerably less enthusiastic criticism than the accompanying show due to the tepid reflection of Friel's idea on the fictitious nature of reality, which resulted in a rather melodramatic approach to romantic relationships (Franco 59).

Give Me Your Answer, Do! (1997)

The latest production of one of Friel's works to date has been a translation into Catalan under the name of *La resposta*, premiered in 2019. This play counted on multiple reasons to become a great commercial success: the appeal of the director – the actress and stage director Sílvia Munt, famous for her work in both film and television – the significant number of popular and highly respected actors, the premiere in a large hall, the Goya theatre, within the Grec festival (one of the most important theatre festivals in Spain) and the quality of the production, among other aspects.

In an interview on the occasion of the premiere, Munt admitted her enormous admiration for Friel's work, which she had already used in her first feature film as a director, *Pretextos*. This 2008 film tells the story of the conflicts of a marriage between a theatre director and her husband. The play which the film's protagonist is directing is *The Yalta Game*. As Munt explained, she asked Friel for the rights to use the play and he gifted them to her; not only that, but he also wrote her a warm letter of commendation after seeing the film, for which she was immensely grateful (Barranco 54). In another interview, the director elaborated on the enormous quality of Friel as a playwright, despite what she considered to be a lack of adequate recognition. In her opinion, Friel was an author who reflected with honesty and lucidity the essence of humanity, the pressing questions which always haunt us, the way we endure existence and how we relate to others (Farré n.p.).

The actress Emma Vilarasau, who had been part of the cast of *Dansa d'agost* at the Teatre Lliure, took part in this production and was also one of the instigators of *La resposta*, as she became an enthusiast of Friel's writing ever since she had acted under the direction of Planella (Farré n.p.). It is also worth noting that Ferran Rañé, the actor who had bought the rights to perform *Afterplay* in 2007 without ever having staged it, played one of the leading roles in *La resposta*.

Conclusions

An analysis of the history of the staging of Friel's plays in Spain indicates that sometimes a playwright's work needs different attempts to finally gain popularity among theatre professionals. As shown here, the first two productions (both based on *Lovers*) went unnoticed, while the third one (based on *Translations*), probably because of its political repercussions, ignited the fire as far as Catalonia was concerned. However, if we consider the fact that none of the other plays produced in Spain openly deal with political issues, we are forced to conclude that the identity dimension must play a more decisive role in the imbalance of the number of directors representing Friel's plays in each territory. This can be noted in the reasons given by the protagonists of several remarkable productions – Pere Planella, Xicu

Masó, Ferran Utzet and Miquel Górriz – who openly expressed the similarity between the peoples of Ireland and Catalonia, whether in reference to their condition as a subjugated nation, or, like Masó, to the similarity of character, which helps to explain why eleven different directors in Catalonia have been responsible for the staging of Friel’s works, while only three have done so in Madrid, two in Galicia and two in the other territories. The different appreciation becomes clear when one focuses on the production of *Afterplay*, where it can be noted that Friel is not viewed as Irish by directors and actors from Navarre, Madrid or Andalusia, but rather as a Chekhovian playwright whose interest lies precisely in having been able to absorb the Russian essence, as can be ascertained in the qualification of the text provided by Blanca Portillo: “[E]ste texto es un *chéjov*, aunque lo haya escrito un irlandés” (This text is a *Chekhov*, even though it was written by an Irishman) (Torres, “El teatro” 44).

Leaving aside the question of identity, when studying the productions, two strands can be observed: on the one hand, William Layton with his T.E.I. exerted a singular influence on later stage directors, such as Eduardo Puceiro, Juan Pastor and José Carlos Plaza, who were responsible for most of the productions of Friel’s works outside the Catalan scene. On the other hand, the unprecedented success of *Dansa d’agost* at the Teatre Lliure, under the direction of Pere Planella, has influenced all subsequent readings of Friel’s texts in Catalan, including the production by the Teatre Micalet company in Valencia.

Notwithstanding the above, I would like to draw attention to the recurrent expressions in the reasons given by the directors for the selection of Friel’s texts, with empathy, humanism, poetic language, sense of humour, deep knowledge of human nature, the complexity of the characters and the well-designed theatrical structure being the most repeated; as well as the opinion shared by all the actors interviewed that Friel is a playwright for actors because of the complexity of the characters which he portrays and the beauty of the dialogues. This demonstrates that, despite other subsidiary motivations, what theatre professionals consider the main appeal of Friel’s works is the extraordinary quality of the writing.

Notes

¹ I am deeply indebted to all the directors (Pere Planella, Juan Pastor, Xicu Masó, Joan Peris, Imma Colomer, Ferran Utzet), actors (Míriam Alamany, Pilar Almería and the cast of the Abbey Theatre’s *Translations*), translators (Guillem J. Graells and Javier Nogueiras) and producer (Salvador Collado) for acceding to be interviewed. I am also very grateful to the staff of the CDAEM archives for providing me with documentation on all the plays staged, mainly reviews and programmes.

² The case of Madrid differs from the rest of the territories in the type of productions staged, considering that a high number of them (six out of eight) have been small productions by the company Guindalera, under the direction of Juan Pastor.

³ *Centro de documentación de las artes escénicas y de la música* –Spanish documentation centre of the performing arts.

⁴ *Centre de documentació i museu de les arts escèniques* –Catalan documentation centre and museum of the performing arts.

⁵ Raimon is a very popular songwriter from Xàtiva whose lyrics have always been composed in Catalan. At that moment, Catalan nationalists deemed him as an advocate for their vindications.

⁶ *Afterplay* is part of a triad of plays written with a playful intention. They have not been performed often and have not received much attention from critics or academics worldwide.

⁷ See for example Bertha (162), Pine (288), McGrath (248-280), Roche (196-197) and Gaviña-Costero (311-326).

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