

DRAMA

How does Irish Drama show on stage the survival of the Irish people in the face of conflict and disappointment?

Within all theatre, conflict is the driving action that moves the dramatic plot as well as defining the characters onstage. Unlike other theatre styles, Irish plays, as seen in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (*Beauty Queen*) and *Dancing at Lughnasa*, characters are not seen to triumph over conflict and disappointment; rather they “survive” it and continue on. Playwrights, Martin McDonagh and Brian Friel, alongside directors of productions, manipulate the script and use dramatic techniques to highlight the stoicism, fortitude, strength, resilience and most importantly, the endurance of the Irish people in the face of conflict and often disappointment.

It must be noted that contextually, the Irish people their history have had their fair share of conflict, trials and disappointments; in the Great Famine, Invasions and occupation, the Easter Rebellion and even in contemporary society, are suffering from the effects of the Global Financial Crisis. Many of these hardships have shaped the Irish response and character, instilling a stoicism and endurance in the Irish people, as a nation and as individuals. These values and attitudes that are thus instilled are reflected and examined on an individual and familial level in the differing contexts of *Dancing at Lughnasa* (set in 1936) and *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1989). On stage, both families are depicted in poverty, in the scripted inclusions of “cod in butter sauce” and Maggie’s preparations of meagre meals for the family, as well as in the set design; the dull dank and relatively empty stage of Druid Theatre’s *Beauty Queen* and the hearty, yet threadbare, lined with empty shelves set of *Dancing at Lughnasa* by the Q Theatre. While poverty unites both plays, they both examine different sources of conflict, with family relations and unwanted interference being key issues in *Beauty Queen* while *Lughnasa*, united originally by familial bonds, the Mundy sisters face many external threats, with the sudden appearance of Gerry, the judgements on Father Jack and employment struggles. Though the conflict varies in both plays, the responses of the character are similar, in reflecting the strength and resilience of the Irish character, notably in light of many historical and nation-wide hardships.

Despite all that the characters go through in both plays, they retain a sense of humour, dissipating the conflict and disappointment they face and, at the same time connect audiences to their humour and optimistic through troubled times. Within the Mag-Maureen duologues, though littered with mentions of the hardships they face, with evident tension existing between them, they still manage to laugh and interpret their lives through a humorous or optimistic lens. Maureen’s dry humour in ‘of course cold’ and ‘of course wet’ to the ritualistically obvious questions that mag insists on asking (with the monotony of their lives heightened in a school performance through the inclusion of a ticking-clock recording to fill the silences of their conversation). Particularly within the STC production of *Beauty Queen* we see, Maureen’s disappointment from her lost love, Pato Dooley, masked by comedic language, arrogance and sexual innuendo. Against her geriatric mother, Maureen states haughtily “I suppose it’s been while since you’ve seen what they remind me of”; in relation to the phallic symbolism of shortbread fingers. This action, through the comedy, resonates with audiences of the complexities of human relationships and the strength of the Irish character.

This same humour in the face of disappointment is evident in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Maggie, in the Q theatre production, waves her beloved ‘wild woodbine’ cigarettes about, and dances with frenzied joy, inviting the audience to laugh with her - despite the fact that these cigarettes are the sole luxury the family can afford. This resilience is equally prevalent in the physicality of the actor’s onstage, demonstrating the Irish optimism and humour through their physical energy of the actors, not slumping or resigned to their fate, but often dancing and singing together. Even the set in the Q theatre production reflects this optimism and humour, with warm orange lights reflective of the harvest and not reflective of the sombre nature of the play. In this environment, throughout the play, the characters are able to poke fun and laugh at each other, softening even the strict, uptight stage presence of Kate; enjoying a blissful ignorance of the ultimately tragic conclusion to the play.

While they can laugh, the Irish characters in both plays are also depicted as strong, resilient characters with a fiery, fighting spirits. In accepting the hardships, conflict and often resulting disappointment they are in no way resigned to such fates, instead actively working to fight it. This is seen in an interesting, and for the audience, a very confronting manner, within *Dancing at Lughnasa*. As stated within the play, mid-way through a spotlight falls on the narrator, Michael, who, with full audience attention, foretells the horrific events and disappointments that will befall the Mundy household. In the knowledge of the tragic and depressing ending to the play, the audience can do nothing but admire the fighting spirit of the characters onstage. Throughout the entire play, the sisters are constantly working, Rose and Aggie in the corner knitting, Kate arriving back from her two mile walk from work, Maggie cooking and calling to the chickens and Chrissie ironing the clothes for the entire household. This conveys to audiences the strength of the Irish character, working and continuing even through the struggles; even in the face of ultimate tragedy and loss.

Similarly, in *Beauty Queen*, neither Mag nor Maureen shies away from the conflict and tension that arises. Often dragging in the unsuspecting Ray and Pato Dooley, they continually fight for supremacy, yelling, deceiving and plotting against the other. However, it is often the extent to which they fight that shocks the audience, with audible gasps of shock when Mag maliciously shuffles forward (in the STC production) to burn Pato's letter that would have guaranteed her daughter's happiness. Equally, the greatest shock of the Irish fighting spirit comes at the conclusion of the play. While filled with black humour of "chopping off your head... and spit in your neck" the play (and majority of productions) imply a most cruel and sudden murder of Mag by her daughter; being bashed on the head by iron poker. Unlike *Lughnasa*, the fierce and fighting nature of the Irish is placed in a questionable light, but, as Maureen sits at the conclusion of the play, as a near spitting-image of her mother, despite its less than noble-intentions, it is evident that the Irish face conflict and disappointment head on and with vigour.

In essence, both *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *Dancing at Lughnasa* capture, through the incredible scripts of Martin McDonagh and Brian Friel and the work of directors (as seen in *Druid*, *STC* and *Q-theatre* productions) demonstrate the Irish stoicism and fortitude; in their humour and optimism as well as their ability to continually fight the disappointment and conflict of their circumstances. Though neither play ends 'happily' the purposes of the play, and ultimately their conclusions, serve to highlight elements of the Irish character that allow them as to a race to survive and endure the adversity, hardships and disappointment that they find themselves surrounded by.