

MELBOURNE THEATRE COMPANY

— EDUCATION PACK PART A —



FAITH HEALER

by Brian Friel

4 MAR — 8 APR

SOUTHBANK THEATRE
THE SUMNER

A Belvoir production

BELVOIR 

MTCC MELBOURNE
THEATRE
COMPANY

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Photo by Earl Carter

MELBOURNE THEATRE COMPANY

MTC is Melbourne's home of live storytelling, producing an annual mainstage season of up to 12 plays, an annual Education production and diverse learning program, play readings, and more. MTC is one of the major performing arts companies in Australia, and one of the largest theatre companies in the English-speaking world. Founded in 1953, MTC is also the oldest professional theatre company in Australia, and currently exists as a semi-autonomous department of the University of Melbourne.

As Australia changed, MTC has changed with it. We like to think that we have frequently been at the forefront of Australian culture, introducing new ideas and new ways of looking at our lives, our society and the world; helping to explain a swiftly evolving landscape as we moved through it. Today, with Southbank Theatre as our performance home and our headquarters in Sturt Street, Southbank, MTC strives to present Melbourne audiences with the best drama from Australia and overseas to the highest standards.

Our Vision: To enrich lives with understanding and empathy through the storytelling power of the finest theatre imaginable.

Our Artistic Purpose: To produce classic and contemporary Australian and international theatre with style, passion and excellence in order to entertain, challenge and enrich audiences.

MTC acknowledges the Yalukit Willam Peoples of the Boon Wurrung, the Traditional Owners of the land on which Southbank Theatre and MTC HQ stand, and we pay our respects to Melbourne's First Peoples, to their ancestors past and present, and to our shared future.

Contexts and Conversations

“Theatre can be defined as a performative art form, culturally situated, ephemeral and temporary in nature, presented to an audience in a particular time, particular cultural context and in a particular location.” (Anthony Jackson, 2007)

Because theatre is an ephemeral art form – here one moment, gone the next – and contemporary theatre making has become more complex, Part A of the *Faith Healer* MTC Education Pack offers teachers and students a rich and detailed introduction to the play in order to prepare for seeing the production – possibly only once. In this first part of the resource we offer you ways to think about the world of the play, playwright, structure, theatrical styles, stagecraft, contexts – historical, cultural, social, philosophical, and political, characters, and previous productions. These are prompts only. We encourage you to read the script by the wonderful Irish playwright, Brian Friel.

Part B of the Education Pack will be available just before the production opens, providing a detailed approach to the Theatre Studies Unit 3 performance analysis task. The extract below from the VCE Theatre Studies Study Design is a reminder of the Key Knowledge required and the Key Skills you need to demonstrate in your analysis of the play.

Theatre Studies Unit 3 – Area of Study 3 – Outcome 3

On completion of this unit the student should be able to analyse and evaluate the interpretation of a written playscript in production to an audience. To achieve this outcome the student will draw on key knowledge and key skills outlined in Area of Study 3.

Key knowledge

- The contexts of the interpretation of a written playscript
- Decisions taken that were evident in the production to interpret the written playscript for performance
- The application of acting and other stagecraft to develop the written playscript for performance
- Theatrical styles in the written playscript and in the play in performance
- Terminology and expressions used to describe, analyse and evaluate a theatrical production

Key skills

- Analyse ways in which the contexts of a written playscript were interpreted through performance to an audience
- Evaluate the interpretation of the written playscript for performance
- Analyse and evaluate the application of acting and other stagecraft to develop the written playscript for performance
- Discuss similarities and differences of theatrical styles between the playscript and the play in performance
- Use appropriate theatrical terminology and expressions

Characters

Frank – a faith healer, middle-aged, the husband of Grace.

Grace – Frank’s wife, she is in early middle-age, British, indifferent to her appearance and barely concealing her distraught mental state.

Teddy – Frank’s manager, a Cockney.

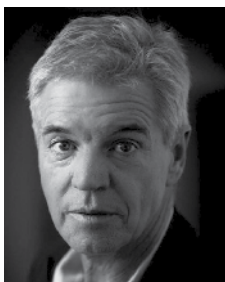
How Does the Script Describe These Characters?

FRANK: Frank is described in the stage directions as “middle-aged; grey or greying, pale, lined face. The overcoat (he is wearing) is unbuttoned, the collar up at the back; either navy or black and of heavy-nap material; a good coat once but now shabby stained, slept-in. Underneath he is wearing a dark suit that is polished with use; narrow across the shoulders; sleeves and legs too short. A soiled white shirt. A creased tie. Vivid green socks”. Teddy describes him as a drunkard, a “two bottles of whiskey a day” man.

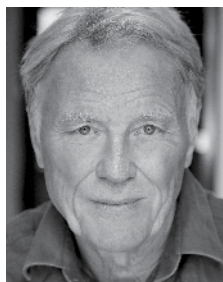
GRACE: In the script Grace Hardy speaks of herself as follows: “But I am getting stronger, I am becoming more controlled – I’m sure I am. I measure my progress – a silly index, I know, and he would certainly have scoffed at it – but I can almost measure my progress by the number of hours I sleep and the amount I drink and the number of cigarettes I smoke. And, as they say, I’ve a lot to be thankful for; I know I have”. Frank describes Grace as “correct, methodical, orderly”, someone who “fed me, washed and ironed for me, nursed me, humoured me. Saved me, I’m sure, from drinking myself to death”.

TEDDY: The faith healer, Frank Hardy, says of his manager, Teddy: “Yes, let me tell you about Teddy, my manager, Cockney. Buoyant. Cheerful. Tiny nimble feet. Dressed in cord jacket, bow-tie, greasy velour hat. I never knew much about his background except that he had been born into show business. And I never understood why he stayed with me because we barely scraped a living. But he had a devotion to me and I think he had a vague sense of being associated with something...spiritual and gave him satisfaction. If you met him in a bar he’d hold you with those brown eyes of his”.

Cast and Creatives



Colin Friels
Francis Hardy



Pip Miller
Teddy



Alison Whyte
Grace



Judy Davis
Director



Brian Thomson
Set Designer



Tess Schofield
Costume Designer



Verity Hampson
Lighting Designer

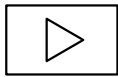


Paul Charlier
Composer & Sound
Designer

Synopsis

The fantastic Francis Hardy works his magic, curing the sick and giving strength to the weak. His powers are real. Or so he says, and sometimes believes. He can tell you of nights when miracles were conjured as fast as he could place his touch. But that was long ago and his powers are far less reliable these days. More of a mystery now is why his embittered wife and hapless manager still put such faith in him after all that's happened. Presented in four monologues, the three characters – Frank, Grace and Teddy – shed light on events that eventually lead to tragedy.

With its mythic resonance and drama of Gaelic folklore, *Faith Healer* is considered to be Irish playwright **Brian Friel's** masterpiece, where characters take turns wrestling with the past, proving that memory can be as unreliable, and as contradictory, as faith. This production, directed by **Judy Davis**, stars **Pip Miller** (*Death of a Salesman*) as the crass showman-cum-manager Teddy, **Alison Whyte** (*Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*) as the faithful yet disillusioned wife Grace, and **Colin Friels** (*Skylight*) as the melancholic, charismatic Francis Hardy.



Watch an interview with Alison Whyte, the actor who plays Grace in *Faith Healer*:
[youtube.com/watch?v=VG5U6TQjm64](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VG5U6TQjm64)

Structure

“Friel gives us three characters, speaking four monologues. The first and last belong to Frank Hardy, a travelling healer who, after slogging through one-night stands in Wales and Scotland, returns to his native Ireland in the hope of restoring his ailing powers. The second speech comes from his long-time mistress, Grace, who has forsaken her patrician legal background to join this genius and charlatan. The third, and in many ways finest, is delivered by Teddy, a seedy showbiz agent who has stayed with the fractious duo out of a devotion that even he cannot fully understand.”

Michael Billington, reviewing *Faith Healer* (2001), [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com)

“The play is a mystery story in both the mundane and spiritual senses. Though each of the narrators tells essentially the same tale in four soliloquies (Frank speaks first and last), their accounts disagree in ways that leave us dizzy ... You'll have no trouble getting the gist of the experiences shared by Frank, Grace and Teddy ... But beyond that you don't know what version of reality to accept.”

Ben Brantley, reviewing *Faith Healer* (2006), [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com)



Discuss Structure

Read the quotes from reviewers above:

- What do these reviews tell you about the structure of the play?
- Why has Friel structured the play in this way?
- How does the structure of the play support its themes?

Setting

The space we see initially is suggestive of an old church hall, like the ones where “fantastic” Frank Hardy worked his faith healing magic, or not. We then meet Grace, Frank’s now separated wife, in a London bedsit. Teddy’s monologue suggests he is in a sitting room. The same performance space conjures each of these settings, and the costume design in particular evokes the setting of the 1950s/1960s.



Discuss Setting

- How might the performance space be used to create these three locations?
-

The Title of the Play – What is Faith Healing?

Frank: Faith healer – faith healing. A craft without an apprenticeship, a ministry without responsibility, a vocation without a ministry.

Faith healing is founded on the belief that certain people have the ability to eliminate disease or heal injuries through a close connection to a higher power. Faith healing can involve prayer, a visit to a religious shrine, or simply a strong belief in a supreme being. Other common names include spiritual healing. Available scientific evidence does not support claims that faith healing can cure cancer or any other disease. In the United Kingdom some council websites provide further information about faith healers who channel spiritual healing energies to help people who are sick.

What does it involve?

Faith healing can be practiced near the patient or at a distance from the patient. When practiced from afar, it can involve a single faith healer or a group of people praying for, or directing their thoughts toward, the patient. When near to the patient, as in revivalist tent meetings, healing is administered by the healer touching, or “laying hands on,” the patient while calling on a supreme being.

Sources: American Cancer Society, Faith Healing on cancer.org; and Fife Council, Spiritual Healing on fife.gov.uk

Do faith healers still exist?

Yes. Dr Alison Brown, an evangelist who recently began preaching in Gloucester, claimed that the power of prayer “can cure anything”. She believed “faith healing works by faith in God and his ability to heal, without any doubt or unbelief present.” Head information nurse at Cancer Research UK, Martin Ledwick, advised against relying on faith healing, but did acknowledge that “many people find religious beliefs and spirituality an important way to help them cope with cancer and its treatment”. In 2014 self-proclaimed faith healer Laszlo Magyari came to Melbourne on his healing tour, laying hands on parishioners and expelling “evil” from their bodies. However, not everyone in attendance was convinced of the apparent miracles, such as president of the Australian Skeptics Victorian Branch and a pastor from country Victoria.

Sources: Faith healer in Gloucester on gloucestershirelive.co.uk; and Troels Sommerville, Hopeful attend Hungarian ‘miracle healer’ on heraldsun.com.au



Discuss Faith Healing

Discuss the concept of faith healing:

- From your reading of the playscript why does Frank believe he can heal others?
 - Why do you think people place their trust in faith healing?
 - How might the concept of faith healing act as a metaphor in the play?
-



Contextual Information

The following background information is a starting point to understanding contexts; the world of the playwright, the world of the play and their political, historical and social influences.

Context: Political and Historical

The playwright, Brian Friel, lived in Derry, Northern Ireland during the Irish ‘Troubles’. The ‘Troubles’ refers to a violent thirty-year conflict framed by a civil rights march in Londonderry on 5 October 1968 and the Good Friday Agreement on 10 April 1998. At the heart of the conflict lay the constitutional status of Northern Ireland.

The goal of the unionist and overwhelmingly Protestant majority in Northern Ireland was to remain part of the United Kingdom. The goal of the nationalist and republican, almost exclusively Catholic, minority was to become part of the Republic of Ireland. This was a territorial conflict, not a religious one. At its heart lay two mutually exclusive visions of national identity and national belonging. The principal difference between 1968 and 1998 is that the people and organisations pursuing these rival futures eventually resolved to do so through peaceful and democratic means. This ascendancy of politics over violence was not easily achieved.

On ‘Bloody Sunday,’ January 30, 1972, during a peaceful civil rights march conducted in defiance of a government ban, British paratroopers opened fire on a crowd of Catholic protesters in Derry City. Thirteen people were shot dead. None was armed. The next day, on January 31, the IRA called for a general strike to protest the shootings. On February 2 in Dublin 25,000 demonstrators rallied, destroying the British Embassy. The ‘Troubles’ had been born.

During the ‘Troubles’, the scale of the killings perpetrated by all sides – republican and loyalist paramilitaries and the security forces – eventually exceeded 3,600. As many as 50,000 people were physically maimed or injured, with countless others psychologically damaged by the conflict, a legacy that continues to shape the post-1998 period. The map below clearly shows the Republic of Ireland (in yellow), and Northern Ireland (in grey) which remains part of the United Kingdom.

Sources: BBC History, The Troubles on bbc.co.uk; and Timothy Hayes, Brian Friel and the Conflict in Northern Ireland (1997) on fisherpub.sjfc.edu



Context: Social – Irish Theatre

Field Day Theatre Company, started by Brian Friel and actor Stephen Rea in 1980, originally aimed to tour Irish theatre for Irish audiences. However, the company is better remembered for the political issues it raised. The pair were joined by four prominent Northern Irish writers (Seamus Deane, Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin and David Hammond), creating a group of three Protestants and three Catholics who represented a symbolic reinforcement of the company's ambition to use culture to heal sectarian divides.

The premiere production of Friel's play *Translations* was a landmark moment in Irish theatre history. Not only was it a masterpiece of theatrical innovation, but the play's investigation of language, identity and cultural memory set the tone for the major cultural debates that would echo throughout Ireland, North and South, during the ensuing decade of sectarian conflict. Touring throughout the entire island with a new production every year, Field Day was at the centre of this debate and was also responsible for generating much of it. All of the members of Field Day agreed that art and culture had a crucial role to play in the resolution of the 'Troubles'.

Rea believed that Field Day's work had resonance outside of a theatrical context because "it was directed at a very broad kind of audience, not just a theatre audience or the theatre ghetto, but into the veins of public opinion. What was unique about it was that it was a theatre of debate or discussion; [we were] looking for a way out when the ceasefire wasn't even a remote possibility." Field Day became an artistic response to the violence, history and politics that divided Northern Ireland into a series of seemingly irresolvable dichotomies; Orange/Green, Unionist/Nationalist and Protestant/Catholic are only the most prominent.

Source: Sara Keating, Dramatic field of vision on irishtimes.com



Discuss Context

From reading the background information offered:

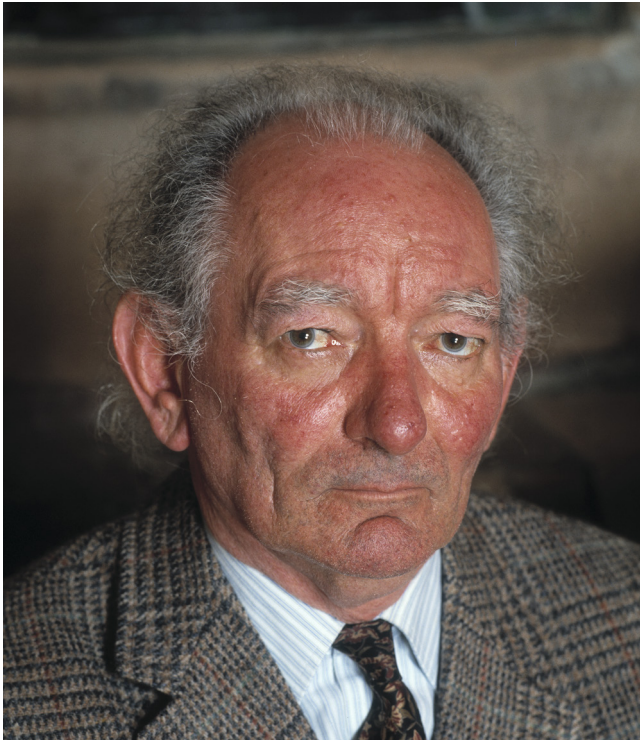
- How would you describe the **contexts** in which Brian Friel was writing?
 - What evidence can you find in the **playscript** to support any or all of the above information?
 - What is suggested by the description of the Field Day Theatre Company in terms of the **intentions** of Brian Friel and his contemporaries' plays?
-



Pip Miller in *Faith Healer*.
Photo by Brett Boardman.

The Playwright

Photo by Hugo Glendinning



Brian Friel (1929-2015)

Born in County Tyrone, Ireland, in 1929, Friel was an Irish dramatist and short story writer. Brian Friel’s international status was founded on the profoundly local: the universal resonance of ‘Ballybeg’, which projected him as “the Irish Chekhov”, emphasising his extraordinary affinity with the Russian playwright. Friel addressed themes such as language and meaning, faith and authority, through the medium of the family and its search for the elusive quality of “home” – painfully evident in his most Chekhovian play, *Aristocrats*. He was concerned with everyday preoccupations rather than the notion of a tragic hero. “You delve into a particular corner of yourself that’s dark and uneasy, and you articulate the confusions and unease, then you acquire other corners of unease and discontent,” Friel once said.

Source: Richard Pine, Brian Friel obituary on theguardian.com



Being Brian Friel

Research the biography of Brian Friel then introduce yourself to the class in character. Start your research here:

- britannica.com/biography/Brian-Friel
 - theguardian.com/stage/2015/oct/02/brian-friel
-

Context: How *Faith Healer* draws on Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*

By rendering the action of *Faith Healer* through discrete monologues, Friel underlines the isolation of his characters, who need one another desperately but remain encased within their separate and irreconcilable subjectivities. At the play’s center is Francis Hardy, an itinerant faith healer who spent years plying his precarious trade in the company of his stalwart Cockney manager, Teddy, and his lover, Grace—whom Frank says is English although we come to learn that she is Irish, and to whom Frank persistently refers as his “mistress” although both Grace and Teddy agree that she was his wife. Each of the characters’ monologues circles around the same territory: namely, a series of events in their shared past that culminated with Frank’s murder and, later, Grace’s suicide. But the audience grows increasingly aware of discrepancies in the counting, from the seemingly mundane (if one character says it was sunny at a particular moment in the past, you can be certain that another will insist it was raining) to the clearly momentous.

Because the monologues are all that we are granted, we must assess the “truth” value of the conflicting accounts without having an actually dramatized past against which to measure them. As the audience gradually discerns, there is no single, authoritative version of the past to be found in *Faith Healer*. Rather, the play is about the characters’ endlessly confounded quest for a reassuring fixity—for something, as the Faith Healer describes it, that might render him “whole in myself”—which turns out to be obtainable only outside of life: in art, as Pirandello tells us, and also, as Friel adds, in death.

Repeatedly, *Faith Healer* emphasizes the overpowering need that human beings have for one another; and as we have seen, what each character needs from the others is incompatible with what those others need in return, so that they become like the lovers on Keats' urn (see *Ode to a Grecian Urn* by English Romantic poet John Keats)—forever in hot pursuit, never satisfied. More than that, Friel suggests that others, for all of our need of them, rob us of a self. Grace notes that “in drawing sustenance” from her, Frank drained her and left her depleted. And yet we cannot have a self without others. Pirandello's representation of this problem takes a metaphorical form when his Father, in *Six Characters*, worries about how he will be performed by the Leading Man: “It will be difficult to act me as I really am. The effect will be rather...as he senses me...and not as inside of myself feel myself to be”. If we cannot exist without being perceived (or “acted”), but we are never perceived accurately, can we exist?

Source: Gleitman, C. (2009). Three characters in search of a play: Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* and the Quest for final Form. *New Hibernia Review*, 13(1), pp. 95-108: Project Muse.



Discuss The Play

What does the excerpt from the article by Gleitman (above) reveal about *Faith Healer*? Consider the play's:

- Structure
- Focus
- Themes



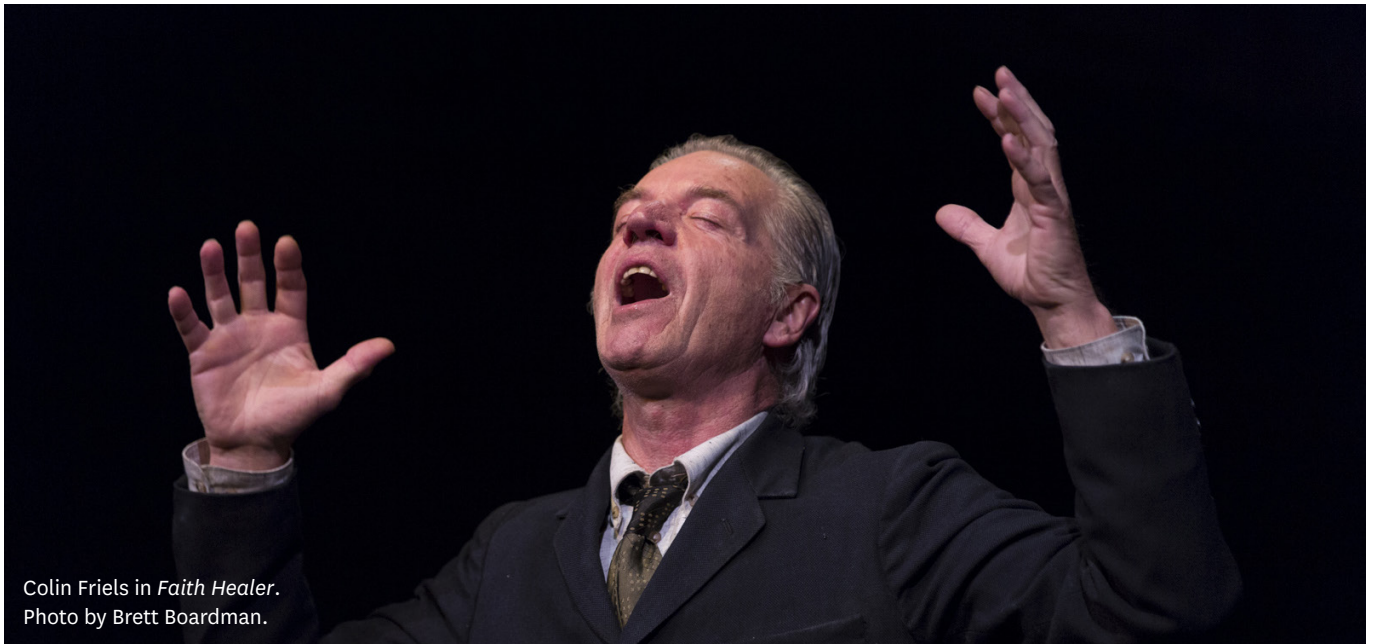
Literary Connections

Chekov's drama, *The Three Sisters*, was directed by Stanislavsky at the Moscow Art Theatre in 1900. The director's point was to show the hopes, dreams and aspirations of the play's characters but "...audiences were affected by the pathos of the sisters' loneliness and desperation and by their eventual uncomplaining acceptance of their situation".

Pirandello's play, *Six Characters in search of an Author*, is an absurdist play whereby the relationship between the author, characters and performers is explored through the sudden appearance at a rehearsal of six 'characters' whose stories remain 'unfinished'. The play is their attempt to tell 'the truth' and 'finish' their stories.

Research the plays described above and compare them to *Faith Healer*:

- Why might Brian Friel's writing be critically related to **Anton Chekov**?
 - Why might Brian Friel's writing be critically related to **Luigi Pirandello**?
-



Colin Friel in *Faith Healer*.
Photo by Brett Boardman.

Theatrical Styles

To call a play social realist recognises that it has political or moral intentions, an engagement with the darker or more controversial aspects of contemporary society and deals with recognisable social issues... **'Social Realism'** should be taken to mean 'drama that engages with the contemporary world...' where 'the contemporary...is...the focus of active investigation'...it should also have political or moral intentions, and be recognisable in its presentation of the world.

Adapted from: Lacey, S. (2011). Staging the contemporary: politics and practise in post-war social realist theatre. In: Tucker, D. (ed.) British realism in the arts since 1940. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan. pp.57-80.

Faith Healer is, in part, a **thriller**, whose boundaries are so subtle and slippery that the crime could almost be missed. At the centre of the drama is a death (artistic or physical, you decide) that viewers can only piece together slowly, bit by bit. **In its style it is social realism.** Brian Friel possessed a unique ability to portray a sense of Ireland and **Irishness** in his work and to do so with an unerring sense of realism. That realism was evident in Plays such as 'Philadelphia, Here I Come!', with emigration as one of its central themes and which was performed all over the world, resonating deeply with generations of Irish people living overseas and serving as a valuable connection between Ireland and the Global Irish family. In Brian Friel's view of the world there were no small experiences and no small people, but there could be small-mindedness on the part of supposed big people or systems.

Source: Rachel Flaherty, Brian Friel, 'giant of world theatre', dies aged 86 on irishtimes.com



Discuss Theatrical Styles

Discuss each of the **bolded terms** in the above descriptions of *Faith Healer* referring closely to the script and to the contextual information. In particular consider:

- Why is the play described as a **thriller**?
 - What is meant by **Irishness**? What does the written playscript indicate with regard to this?
 - What does the term social realism mean? What are the **conventions** of this style?
-

Irish Drama

Faith Healer, looks back, among other traditions, at the legacy of **medieval drama**, however, loosely the term may be used so as **to include Tudor interludes**. This recognition provides an additional reading in terms of organisation, structure and narrative strategy, so that features of miracle and morality plays made be identified within Friel's play. *Faith Healer* thus exploits strategies and gives new life to an earlier form of drama and, at the same time, rewrites a tradition that is apparently alien to the play. Not by chance does *Faith Healer* open with a list of "dying Welsh villages":

Aberarder, Aberayron
Llangranog, Llangurig,
Abergorlech, Abergynolwyn,
Llandefeilog, Llanerchymedd,
Aberhosan, Aberporth...

The place names of "all those dying Welsh villages" recited in darkness by the play's protagonist evoked from a blurred past, both **tell a story** and accompany the telling of the story. They mark the reconstruction of a **personal history** that has developed along the route from village to village. They represent a storehouse for the protagonist's personal **myth** as he uses his list of place names to convey his restlessness and to silence it, to assert his identity, and to forget who he is. In its different forms and variations, the recital of place names becomes a catalyst and a continuum, a sort of *fil rouge* in the **subtext** of this play which remains – perhaps, the most experimental and impression of those in the Brian Friel canon.

Source: Tallone, G. (2002). Unveiling the Vice: A Reading of Brian Friel's "Faith Healer".
Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS), Vol. 8(1), pp. 199-211: JStor.



Discuss Theatrical Styles

Discuss each of the **bolded terms** in the above descriptions of *Faith Healer* referring closely to the script and to the contextual information. In particular consider:

- What do the terms **drama**, **mythology** and **storytelling** mean? What are the characteristics or **conventions** of these forms or styles?
-



Alison Whyte in *Faith Healer*.
Photo by Brett Boardman.

Meaning and Symbolism in the Play

Meaning and metaphor in Friel's playwriting

Friel goes beyond his predecessors by firmly grounding his dialogue in the theatrical experience. Indeed, Friel is often called “the father of contemporary Irish drama”...

Both *Faith Healer* (1979) and *Molly Sweeney* (1994) are monologic. Their status as theater pieces demands that we respect them as performance, but their form encourages us to treat them as prose poems. Their lack of conventional stage action is, however, through a sort of logical hairpin curve, exactly what makes them so **dramatic**. By replacing **action** with **narration**, Friel not only critiques the Irish penchant for oratory, but he also dramatizes his contention that **events are meaningful mainly insofar as they become stories, fictions told by their participants**. Their meaning resides not in what actually happens but in how they are narrated by and to the people who participated in them...

Faith Healer and *Molly Sweeney* are united both by their monologic form and by their contention that truth is subjective, a matter of perception and recall. Sight becomes a **metaphor** in both *Faith Healer* and *Molly Sweeney* for knowledge...the easy equation of sight and insight is troubled by the unreliability of perception and memory...

Source: DeVinney, K. (1999). Monologue as Dramatic Action in Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* and *Molly Sweeney*. *Twentieth Century Literature*, 45(1), pp.110-119: Jstor.



Discuss Meaning and Symbolism

Discuss each of the **bolded terms** in the above descriptions of *Faith Healer* referring closely to the script and to the contextual information. In particular consider:

- What do the terms **narration** and **metaphor** mean?
- What does the script indicate about theatrical styles?
- What examples can you find in the structure and language?
- What do the extracts above say about **truth** and **meaning**?



Pre-show Predictions

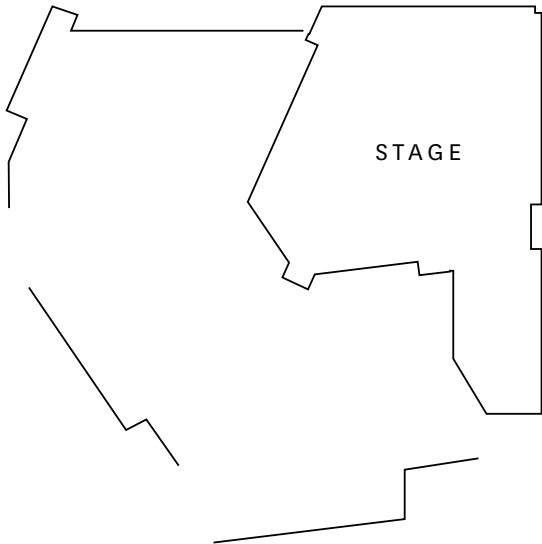
With a partner, write down a list of predictions before you see *Faith Healer* in the Summer:

- What do you expect/anticipate you will see?
- Do you anticipate direct address? Why/why not?
- How important does **language** seem to be in the play?
- Who's story is being told? By whom? To whom?

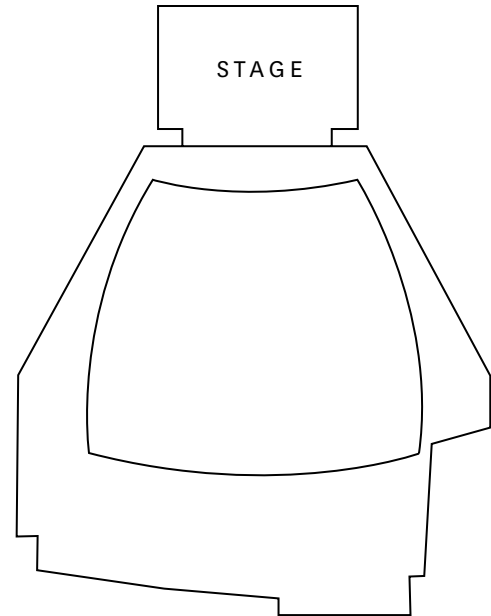
Revisit your discussion and responses after seeing the production and consider if your thoughts and understandings have changed. In particular consider how your understanding of the playscript was interpreted to the stage, particularly the Summer.

The Performance Space

The production of *Faith Healer* that you will see was originally staged at Belvoir's Upstairs Theatre in Sydney. The Upstairs Theatre is a very different venue to the Sumner at Southbank Theatre, where you will see this production. The two images below show the differences between the theatre spaces:

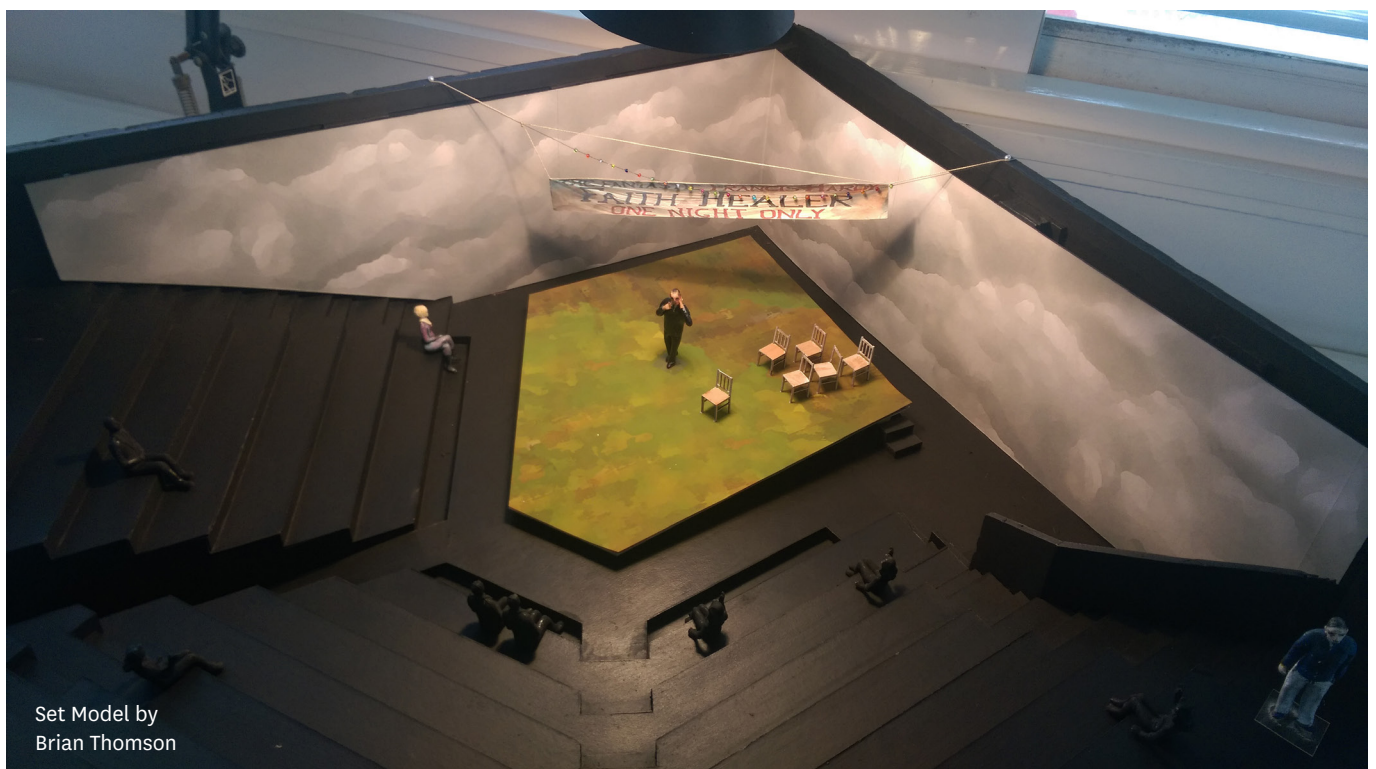


Upstairs Theatre, Belvoir



The Sumner, Southbank Theatre

Below is an image of the set model for *Faith Healer* at Belvoir, designed by Brian Thomson. Note that aspects of the design changed between the set model being constructed and the production opening.



Set Model by
Brian Thomson



Designing for the Stage

Look carefully at the shape of the Upstairs Theatre at Belvoir and Brian Thomson's set model. As a Theatre Studies class discuss how the set design impacts on:

- **Direction, set pieces, properties, lighting, actor/audience relationship**

THEN

Look carefully at the shape of the Sumner Theatre at MTC's Southbank Theatre. As a Theatre Studies class discuss what adaptations may need to be made to put the set into the new space. Consider:

- **Direction, set pieces, properties, lighting, actor/audience relationship**
-

The Script

As a production team your job is to consider what Brian Friel's script offers you. Each monologue is preceded by stage directions that offer insights into the text.



Annotate the Script

Read the script excerpts below and annotate them through the lens of one or more of the following stagecraft areas:

- Direction
 - Acting
 - Lighting design
 - Set design
 - Properties
 - Costume and make-up
 - Sound
-

Excerpt 1: opening scene of the play – Frank Hardy

From: *The stage is in darkness. Brief pause...*

To: *This poster is made of some fabric, line perhaps, and is soiled and abused.*

Excerpt 2: the beginning of Grace's monologue

From: *We discover GRACE HARDY on stage, the same set as Part One...*

To: *Smoking a lot – sometimes lighting one cigarette from the other.*

Excerpt 3: the beginning of Teddy's monologue

From: *We discover TEDDY on stage. He is probably in his fifties but it would be difficult to pin-point...*

To: *Teddy is sitting with his eyes closed, his head back, listening to the music.*

Costume Design

Examine the reference images below collected by costume designer Tess Schofield. These images were used in the creation of an aesthetic for the costumes in the play. As Theatre Studies students discuss and analyse the tones, colours, textures, era, class, culture, gender and other design elements being referenced here.



Discuss Costume Design

Compare these images to the production photos and set model elsewhere in this resource. Consider:

- Why these choices?
- Which characters are they for?
- What in the playscript suggests these?
- Look carefully at the black and white images on the left. How do these images of Ireland and faith healers relate to the pictures of clothes and accessories?
- What world do you think the designer is endeavouring to create?



Mood Board

Choose a character and create your own mood board of reference images for a costume design. Annotate each image to highlight specific reasons why you chose it.

Director's Note



Judy Davis comments on the 2016 Belvoir Production



Born Catholic in County Omagh, Northern Ireland in 1929, Brian Friel's understanding of both his country and his own identity was shaped by being, as he termed it, a member of the minority.

"I certainly think we're a maimed people in this country," Friel once said. "We're a maimed people to the extent that there was once a language in use in this country; this language is gone. When we say we're trying to identify ourselves, I'm not quite saying that we're trying to identify a national identity, that's a different kind of thing. When you talk about a national identity, I'm not quite sure what that means. But when you're trying to identify yourself, that means you've got to produce documents, you've got to produce sounds, you've got to produce images that are going to make you distinctive in some way. If there's a sense of decline in this country, it's because we can't readily produce these identification marks."

Written in the midst of the Troubles, *Faith Healer* (1979) is in part a complex study of identity and sense of place. All three characters are outsiders, itinerants: Frank Hardy the faith healer; Grace his wife, or perhaps mistress; and Teddy, Frank's cockney manager. As they trawl the dying Welsh and Scottish villages of the Celtic fringe of Britain in search of audiences, Teddy refrains: "we are going to make a killing this time, dear hearts." We meet them later, isolated, haunted by anguished memories, searching for reconciliation with the past, for an understanding of the lives they once shared and who or what they might be. But the characters' control over their lives is fragile.

"I think, when the possibility of being able to control, or determine what you should do, or what you must do, is no longer in your hands and can no longer be summoned, I think in that case death occurs. Maybe not necessarily a physical death but a spiritual death occurs." Brian Friel on *Faith Healer*.

These issues of identity, of the importance of a sense of place, of foreign conquest, and of the damage done when one's destiny is out of one's control – all strike a familiar and profound note beyond the shores of Ireland. *Faith Healer* could be described as a memory play: "while memory is about what has happened in the past, it's also about what might have happened but never did." That the characters' troubled memories are often in conflict is unsurprising – we remember differently, sometimes what we need to remember, to create a coherent narrative for ourselves perhaps; at times, perhaps, to hide.

Ballybeg, Friel's imagined town, is a place of haunting memory that often appears in his plays, notably in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Irish writer, Frank McGuinness, once said about the fictional town: "Most Irish people would love to live in Ballybeg, for there is one extraordinary characteristic about this small Donegal town: in Brian's plays it is always very good weather. In fact, it is almost Mediterranean weather – volcanic weather. Because he does see it as a place of passion, and he does see it as a place of revelation; brilliant light."

So, as August yields to September, Frank Hardy makes his fateful journey to Ballybeg. Autumn: harvest season, time of reapers, time of offerings. This is not a simple play; another quote from Friel may be helpful: "I gave up my study for the priesthood out of conflict with my belief in paganism."

Brian Friel died on October 2nd, 2015. His great friend, the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, had evocatively described the spirit of this great dramatist a few years before: “What I remember best, I suppose, about the seventies, is the visits in the summertime up to Donegal. First of all to Brian’s own house in Moft, just outside Derry, but particularly the summer visits to his house in Mollyduft. I associate those summers with the light coming off the sea, with big windows, with a great freshness, with a sense of being in the *Gaeltacht* almost, in the ‘old dream Ireland’. This lighthouse, a house full of sea light, full of conversation, full of energy, full of irony. It was displaced and elsewhere, and Brian was at the centre of it as a focus and a stimulus.”

References

B. Nightingale. ‘Brian Friel, Playwright Called the Irish Chekhov, Dies at 86’, *The New York Times*, 2nd October 2015

S. Rea, ‘Stephen Rea’s tribute to Brian Friel: a shy man and a showman’, *The Irish Times*, 2nd October 2015

‘Brian Friel’, RTÉ, 2000

Source: Director’s Note – Judy Davis on belvoir.com.au



Discuss the Director’s Note

Read the Director’s Note from Judy Davis and consider what insights they offer you about the play, *Faith Healer*:

- What insights does the director offer you about **character**?
 - What do they reveal about the **playwright**?
 - What do they offer with regards to **direction**?
 - What themes, ideas and meanings is the director focussing on in this production?
 - Compare these notes to the playscript and discuss interpretation.
-



Colin Friel in *Faith Healer*.
Photo by Brett Boardman.

Connect



Photo by Sarah Walker



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Check out our official YouTube channel for exclusive videos, including an interview with Alison Whyte (Actor) about *Faith Healer*. **youtube.com/melbtheatreco**

Attendance Information

In this production there is occasional use of strong language, reference to alcoholism and depression, and an offstage death.

For further information, please call the MTC Education team on (03) 8688 0974.

Duration

Approx. 1 hour & 50 minutes (no interval)

Go online to read more about visiting with school groups and opportunities for students.
mtc.com.au/education

Enquiries

For general MTC Education enquiries:

email education@mtc.com.au or contact our Education Coordinator 03 8688 0974.

School bookings:

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