

Happy Mundys

RHODA KOENIG

finds the reel thing,
at last

A memory play, in which 'atmosphere is more real than incident', *Dancing at Lughnasa* (The Lyttleton) may sound like a pale-green wash of nostalgia and faint offstage music. But snaking through the proper Catholic household of the Mundy sisters are the wild Celtic reels of heathen days, the drumbeats and rhythms of Africa.

Raucous, slovenly Maggie, the clown of the family (for such is the all-female household, with women taking the roles of daughter, husband and wife), caterwauls 'The Isle of Capri' and 'Everybody's Doin' It', prompting a reproof from the stern and pious Kate: 'If you knew your prayers as well as you know the words to those pagan songs...'

Reports filter down of flames and animal sacrifice and dancing in the hills, where some of the unregenerate Irish are celebrating Lughnasa, the harvest festival of Lugh, ancient god of the earth's bounty.

Hard, cold religion is unable to extinguish the fire and passion of Brian Friel's women, but a greater enemy will crush them. I suppose it is permissible to call this extraordinary and magnificent play a tragedy if one regards the Mundy sisters' flaw as their decision to have been born in Ireland.

An English or American play might show the sisters liberated by the release of their energies to happiness in sexual or creative expression; it might show them destroyed by their emotions after having plunged into life. But this is 1936 in Donegal where lives are over before they have begun, and no amount of music and dancing will counter the misery and frustration that is these spinsters' lot.

Kate will be cut off from livelihood and comfort by the church she has served so well all her life. Sweet-natured Agnes and simpleminded Rose will take a leaf from *Judè the Obscure* when three eggs are all the sisters have to feed eight people and a knitting factory ends the market for their handmade gloves.

Christine's illegitimate son,

religion; not only does he search with difficulty for the correct word in his creaky English vocabulary, he prattles about ceremonies to appease the ancestral spirits and three-day bats on palm wine. Told that Christine has had a son out of wedlock, he affably remarks that in Africa the women believe a 'love child' brings strength to the household and asks if she has any others.

A more familiar type than this dear and appalling man (touchingly portrayed by Alec McCowen) is Gerry, the father of Christine's son. After more than a year, he waltzes back into her life with stories about the latest dreams he is selling - ('Minerva Gramophones - The Wise Buy') and stories about the presents he would have brought if he hadn't been prevented by forces beyond his control.

Sweeping her into a Fred-and-Ginger routine, as the sisters' wireless plays

Michael, who narrates the play as a middle aged man, is invisible as a child, the empty space underlining his eventual disappearance to the place that can be heard in the harsh, emphatic consonants overlying his brogue.

Yet *Dancing at Lughnasa* is not a depressing experience. Joyous and rich, it is a tender evocation of Irish personalities, the homespun as well as the exotic. Foremost among the latter is Father Jack, the Mundys' older brother, who has come home after 25 years in Uganda, thoroughly muddled in language and

DANCING AT LUGHNASA
ANITA REEVES as Maggie
CATHERINE BYRNE as Chris
STEPHEN DILLANE as Gerry



'Dancing in the Dark', he seduces her all over again, as Kate rages and Maggie beams. Noel Pearson's Abbey Theatre production has the help of Joe Vaněk's uncluttered, attractive set, a cottage without walls bordered by a field of golden, poppy-strewn wheat.

It also has the tremendous acting of Anita Reeves as the loud, self-mocking, lovable Maggie; Roseleen Linehan as the domineering but human Kate ('She's right,' she says, sighing, of a sister's taunt, 'I am a righteous bitch'); and Brid Brennan as the gentle reserved Agnes, the quiet observer in the corner and the most elegant dancer of them all, delicately gesturing like an animated engraving of a 19th-century ballerina.

Crackling to life when it's in the mood, the fretful radio symbolises the intermittent, uncertain nature of the sisters' modest pleasures. One evening they turn it

on, not hoping for much, and out bursts the most thrilling of reels, one the chilly Kate forbids the rest from submitting to.

But if Maggie's ears listen, her feet do not. As she mixes the dough for the family bread, one of them starts tapping, then kicking, and, finally, her whole body is overtaken by the music. Rose then sloppily throws herself into the crazy dance; Agnes, called to join in, leaps up and nimbly capers around the table in her pinny and her bun; Chrissie, who has blasphemously said that the priest's surplice they are ironing would make a pretty dress, pulls it over her head and prances with them.

Increasingly outraged and disgusted, Kate draws further and further back until the music speaks to her too. But, maintaining her dignity, she retreats to the garden, where she dances alone, like a proud tribal chieftain, stamping angrily as if she wishes to drive the devilish music

back down where it belongs. Inside the house Maggie is banging the basin on the counter in ecstasy.

It is an unforgettable scene of desperate snatched happiness. And how does it end? The radio sputters out.

Sad to report, Caryl Churchill's *Mad Forest* is a bleak, dreary series of vignettes on recent events in Romania. People stand forlornly in meat queues, exchange laborious anti-regime jokes and enact other clichés of life under totalitarianism, all in laconic, detached, cryptic dialogue.

The testimony to the audience about a demonstration is as standard as that of a TV documentary without the frisson of actuality, and Churchill's loopy whimsy, when it infrequently breaks out, just distances us further from what should be the power and pity of these grim events.

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