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LEGIT

ABROAD

WONDERFUL TENNESSEE

DUBLIN An Abbey Theater by arrangement with Noel Pearson presentation of a play in two acts by Brian Friel. Directed by, Patrick Mason. Sets and costumes, Joe Vanek; lighting, Mick Hughes; sound, Dave Nolan. Opened June 30, 1993, at the Abbey Theater. £15 (\$28.20) top.

Terry	Donal McCann
Frank	John Kavanagh
Berna	Ingrid Craigie
George	Robert Black
Angela	Catherine Byrne
Trish	Marion O'Dwyer

An enormous sheet lifts magically off the set at the start of "Wonderful Tennessee," and immediately we know we're in Brian Friel country. Joe Vanek's no less magical set shows a disused County Donegal pier, its headland scattered with stones, lobster pots, and fishing nets. But in addition to the look, it's the sound that remains so quintessentially Friel — the steady rhythms of the sea and passing birds punctuating that mysterious and wonderful silence we humans can barely begin to understand.

Friel and his inestimable director Patrick Mason linger on the opening tableau, as well they should, to allow audiences a

an outing to an island whose pagan past he recalls hearing about as a boy.

Known as "the Island of Otherness, the Island of Mystery," it is reached via a boatman, Carlin (read Charon, the Greek ferryman of the dead), who — surprise — never shows up. Instead, the couples pass the night singing, telling stories, trading furtive affections and listening to the accordionist George (Robert Black), a throat cancer victim who long ago learned to express in music what he can no longer say in words.

George is married to Terry's sister Trish (Marion O'Dwyer), a warm-hearted if simple woman who keeps thinking she's in Sligo, not Donegal. (The lapse allows for Friel's most superficial allusion to Sligo's celebrated chronicler Yeats, whose poetry reverberates through this play.) Terry, meanwhile, flirts with his own sister-in-law Angela (Catherine Byrne, late of "Lughnasa"), a classics lecturer whose husband Frank (John Kavanagh) is both the play's resident cut-up and, crucially, its sage. As for George's music, it literally underscores the play, granting it that dimension of Otherness, to co-opt Friel's own word, which the ecstatic sisterly dance early on gave to "Lughnasa." The character has his moment to echo "Lughnasa's" celebrated Dionysiac revel: Asked to contribute a tale to their long night's journey into day, George

given audiences a joyous abundance of it. — Matt Wolf

BRILLIANT LIES

MELBOURNE A Melbourne Theater Company presentation of the RQTC (Queensland) production of a play in two acts by David Williamson. Directed by Aubrey Mellor. Sets, Dale Ferguson; lighting, David Walters; assistant director, David Berthold; MTC production coordinator, Ian Cooksley; stage manager, Stafford Mortensen; assistant stage manager, Lea Trowbridge. Opened May 29, 1993, at the Playhouse, Victorian Arts Center. \$A33 (\$22) top.

Marion	Christine Amor
Susy	Miranda Otto
Vince	Peter Adams
Gary	Chris Betts
Katy	Genevieve Lemon
Brian	Ray Barrett
Paul	Rhett Walton

David Williamson perceives himself as an Australian dramatist seeking primarily to entertain as he reflects on contemporary behavior. His critics prefer to dig deeper, focusing on weighty social and moral issues. Like British counterpart Alan Ayckbourn, Williamson has become his country's most popular playwright not just through "a talent to amuse" but also by affording audiences a second — if occasionally superficial — look at themselves.

He based his last play, "Money and Friends," on a late 1990s reaction to the "greed is good" decade by posing a disturbing hypothesis: How would you respond to a friend's financial disaster? This obviously translated well enough across the Pacific to tweak collective psyches successfully in Los Angeles

chance to absorb the uniquely metaphysical world that Friel, and this play in particular, inhabit. His first original play since the Tony- and Olivier Award-winning "Dancing at Lughnasa" (he has done several adaptations in between), "Wonderful Tennessee" shows the 63-year-old Friel enjoying a late-career creative burst to rival the period just over a decade ago when, in quick succession, he wrote "Aristocrats," "Faith Healer," and "Translations." (The last is enjoying a splendid concurrent London fringe revival headed for the West End.)

Whether "Tennessee" will repeat the international success of "Lughnasa" is doubtful, since it's almost too private and encoded a statement to draw a mass public. Still, as Broadway will discover this fall — the play transfers directly from the Abbey to the Plymouth, opening Oct. 17 — Friel once again shows an unerring capacity to leave a receptive audience awash in tears.

Certainly, those for whom theater means plot need warning: While the memory-play aspect of "Lughnasa" gave it at least a nominal narrative, the new play — set, like "Lughnasa," on an August day at harvest time — is all mood, nuance, sudden turns both of rapture and despair. The ostensible story is a birthday party gone awry: Terry (Donal McCann), a gregarious bookie who has frittered away his money largely in altruistic gestures, invites two couples to join him and his depressive barrister

responds with a section of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata played, as Trish says elsewhere, as if he were "afraid to stop." And Black, an accordionist making his acting debut, is a revelation in the part.

By morning, the characters have moved beyond fear to Frank's simply put "acceptance of what is" — an acknowledgment of the grace in this life which remains our best substitute for transcendence. If it all sounds too oblique by half, director Mason's achievement is to delineate a world pitched halfway between literalism and symbolism, reality and the imagination, matched by a beautifully detailed set which nonetheless seems to float on the Abbey stage. Mason, too, is blessed with a cast among whom Byrne alone struggles to find the ecstatic abandon of a role requiring a young Vanessa Redgrave.

The play falters only in setting up juxtapositions that are often too neat. All it takes is the characters to launch into "I Want To Be Happy" for someone to announce his unhappiness. Later on, Terry's description of a ritual dismemberment is too patly followed by the group's comical dismemberment, so to speak, of him. But Friel recovers in time for a finish in which the group engages in its own healing ritual — the building of a cairn — that leaves this sextet of pilgrims ready to progress. It's a quiet and resonant ending to a no less resonant, if difficult, play: the latest examination of wonder from a writer whose career has

where it ran recently.

By that yardstick "Brilliant Lies," with its theme of sexual harassment in the workplace, should have global appeal. Susy (Miranda Otto), a young office worker, has accused her gung-ho boss Gary (Chris Betts) of prolonged harassment culminating in a clumsy piece of physical molestation. She takes the case to an arbitrator under Australia's Equal Opportunity Act, demanding \$40,000 compensation.

The protagonists seem crudely defined at first, their conflict over-simplified, but Williamson is deliberately snaring us in our own gender prejudices. Susy's clothes are bright and clingingly provocative; her behavior selfish, promiscuous and manipulative.

Gary, an aggressive, macho stereotype with an oversupply of testosterone, has a reputation for forcing himself onto a succession of female employees.

Who is to be believed? It is up to the arbitrator, Marion (Christine Amor), to decide. Williamson muddies the water further by complicating the nature of the combatants' relationship, and by revealing through sister Katy (Genevieve Lemon) that Susy is a compulsive liar, and that their father, Brian (Ray Barrett) also has much to answer for.

Director Mellor achieves a satisfying resolution after a sequence of rapid scenes involving disciplined movements around the green-partitioned set. The veteran Barrett commands the

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