

SIGNIFICANT DATES: October 1989, the Wexford Opera Festival. Patrick Mason hands me a new play by Brian Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa*. - November 1992, Melbourne, Australia. I am down under supervising the thirteenth re-staging of the production and simultaneously reading a new play by Brian, *Wonderful Tennessee*. - March 1993, Donegal. Sitting under a wide, windy sky on the Bloody Foreland, on a five day field trip in search of Ballybeg and wondering if the same cycle is about to repeat itself.

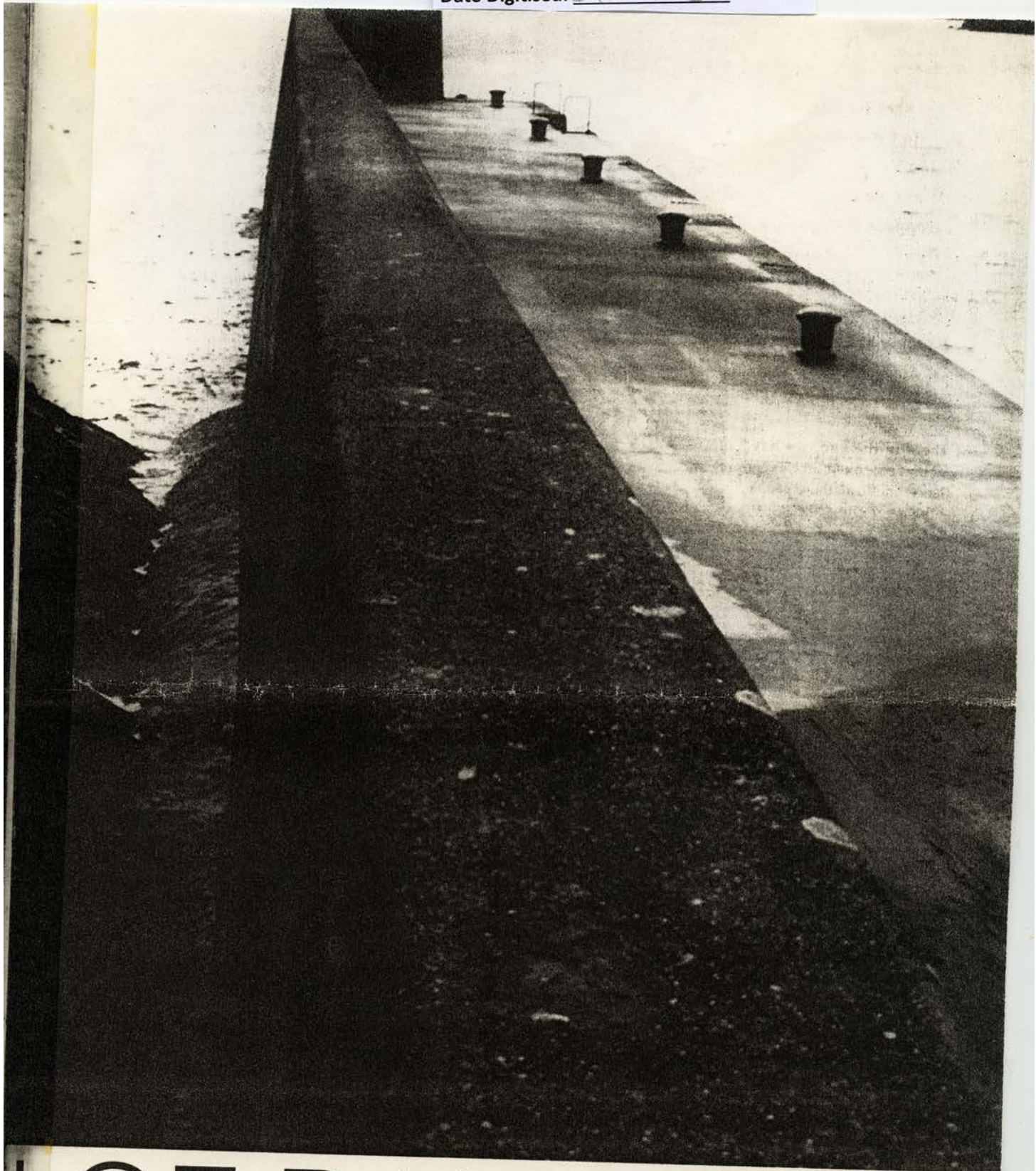
Lughnasa now has a life of its own to lead. Others will discover and present its world to audiences globally and from many varied viewpoints. It is time to let go - hard, but necessary. After such a lengthy association with the phenomenon, it is time to move onto new fields (or, more aptly, piers!) and I wish the play and everyone who will interpret it, much good fortune. As I write I have just despatched technical drawings and photographs to Japan where a Tokyo production (in Japanese) opens in July. There is a commercial run at the Gaiety in Dublin to re-stage and in Britain, a six week run at Leatherhead and Windsor followed by a short third tour. Then it seems it really is time to turn off Marconi and put away the buckets, boots and cross-over aprons.

The astonishing impact of this play, its many performers and the production itself, has been quite unlike anything else I have experienced in my twenty-plus years of working as a stage designer. Looking back on those casts and all the necessary variations on the original design, it has proved to be a constantly evolving process - always challenging, always enjoyable and certainly the most rewarding experience of my career. Occasionally it has been hard not to slip into 'shorthand', to trot out all the glib answers when faced with a sea of open mouthed faces at the seemingly impossible prospect of creating a vertiginous field of wheat, a mountainous turf stack or a dead rooster. Most recently, in Melbourne, I am reminded of a 'new look' - steeper than ever field, planted with a mechanical precision and eye that was breathtaking. With patience and the belief that everyone would find their own paths



IN SEARCH

Joe Vanek, designer of Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* amending a design to suit new circumstances; and about



H OF BALLYBEG

its première and many touring productions, writes about the challenges of constantly
s work for the production of Brian Friel's latest play, *Wonderful Tennessee*.



**Overleaf and right
(a treated version),
Joe Vanek's research
photographs for
*Wonderful Tennessee.***

**Far right,
the set for the
production of
Dancing at Lughnasa in
Australia and Japan**



there in the end, we have achieved consistent excellence, and to all those people, wherever they are - I am extremely grateful.

For those of you who may have lost track of the idiosyncratic progress of this production, a short recap of further 'significant dates':

- From its Abbey premiere in April of 1990, we transferred to the Lyttleton Theatre at the National in London in that October and, following a three month run, doubled back to Dublin in January 1991 for the first revival. Prepared for a Broadway opening later that Spring, but unprepared for the knock-on economic casualties of the Gulf War, we found ourselves all dressed up and nowhere to go. Never one to miss an opportunity, Noel Pearson teamed up with the English producer Bill Kenwright and whisked the company to the decidedly less glamorous environs of the Charing Cross Road and the Phoenix Theatre in March. There (with a summer cast change) we ran until November '91 before transferring down the road to the compact (to put it politely) Garrick Theatre. With further cast changes, we ran there throughout 1992 before finally closing in February this year.

Meanwhile, Broadway still beckoned, as did the second Abbey revival in the summer of '91, prior to our finally opening with what was referred to as the 'original Abbey cast', at the Plymouth theatre that October. Eliciting rave reviews and packed houses, this company (the third reshuffle of cast in fact) notched up its Equity permitted five months fol-

lowed by an American cast including two U.S.A. based Irish actors. An excellent and energetic company kept the play alive and well for a further seven months. However, with the Abbey departed, the charm seemed broken and American audiences proved hard to convince of the worth of the native Company. So, despite all the acclaim, and although playing to respectable audiences, we finally closed almost a year to the day in October '92.

Parallel to these stateside developments ran the British tour. Scarcely were we at the close of '91, before the ubiquitous Mr Kenwright managed to persuade the creative team to re-think a touring version of *Lughnasa* capable of playing the major large and small venues. From the vastness of the Opera House in Manchester and the Memorial Theatre in Stratford to the cosy intimacy of the Cambridge Arts. We set off on an initial six months tour from Liverpool Playhouse in January '92 with a pit stop in Bristol for refurbishment and re-rehearsals, where this excellent touring company transferred to the West End and a new company continued for the rest of the year, coming back to rest in Liverpool in December.

At this point, by the end of '92 and with International Awards rolling in on all sides, the play seemed finally

destined to spread itself further afield. Australia loomed largest, and so in October and November of last year, I went out to supervise the National tour that opened in Melbourne and then went on to play with great success in both Sydney and Adelaide.

This production gave rise to one last National outing before this new company flew south. A third Abbey revival in September was combined with an Irish National tour to both North and South of the border throughout October and November. Again, venues were chosen of vastly differing sizes, and to create a set that looked impressive at Cork Opera House and in the Belltable Arts Centre in

Limerick, was no easy task.

So, there you have it - up to date (for the moment), and as accurately as I can recall. As I write I am told there are approximately fifty planned productions in the U.S.A. and Canada together with others in Germany, Poland, Israel and Spain.

Coda to the Broadway production: In early January 1993, to our complete surprise, a revival of the New York show, presented under another management, surfaced in Stamford and Boston for one month. Such are the wiles of showbusiness. As they say over there - 'Have a nice day!'.

In reliving the complex life of *Lughnasa*, a reader might well be forgive for thinking that throughout this period I did nothing else. Not true at all in fact, although it often felt like it in the midst of yet another theatre transfer, cast change and re-design.

From the original set that featured in Dublin, New York and London, with minor adjustments to fit the Phoenix and major to cram it into the inhospitable Garrick, the British tour necessitated a total re-think. As so many stages were either shallower or narrower, the wheatfield had to be reduced to three parallel wedges (as opposed to one diagonal), lining the back of the set so that, in tandem with side walls in segments, both could be

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reduced in depth accordingly. Despite the set still remaining within its white textured box, the basic acting areas of kitchen and garden lost their angled bias and often where the stage was narrower, the right stage wall moved in, further reducing the size of the garden and field. At times we had to face considerable sight line problems but had to admit there was no 'perfect' solution that wouldn't in some way compromise the feel of the original and this we felt was vital to retain. On the thrust stages encountered on tour (Chichester and Sheffield) the kitchen wall became the back wall and all others vanished. The garden played directly into the audience as opposed to across it and wherever possible we banked up sections of corn to frame either side of the interior and the surprise was that it worked as well as it did.

For the Irish tour however, due to the constant extreme variation in stage sizes we had to abandon entirely any attempt to differentiate, via levels and angles, the sense of inside and out. The main floor was reduced to a single surface traversed with a diagonal grid of rattan matting, breaking up into smaller, flag stone equivalent proportions in the kitchen area. Shaded from earth tones to grey, the set was backed with a high plaster wall with a diagonal relief, also clad in matting, to conjure a sense of hillside. The cornfield totally vanished but for a token few corn stooks, and the set was framed in a black box. Stark, emblematic and versatile as it was, I have to admit to feeling that a lot of the vital atmosphere that this play needs had evaporated, and this new version looked particularly bald on larger stages - though it worked well enough on the small ones. Faced with the same cast, rehearsed with this ground plan, arriving in Australia with scarcely a pause for breath, I was now faced with the problem of how best to put back the potent design elements we had lost without altering the familiar playing area.

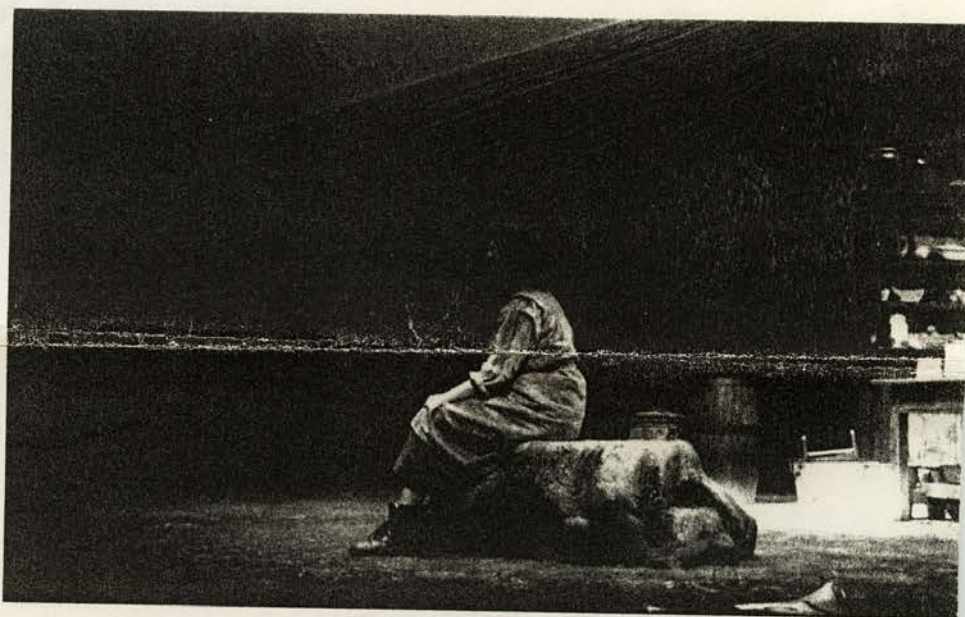
The Wheatfield, which had become a touchstone for the production, was re-introduced, albeit at a much steeper angle and on the opposite side of the stage - corresponding in three dimensions to the diagonal hillside. The whole set still sat in a black box with a

dominant plaster back wall, but this time I added diagonal planes, heavily textured to suggest receding hills and, on stage right, a large slab of granite broke through the back wall - and also featured in the shape of a large rock in the garden which now replaced the bench or the tree trunk that had been used in other versions. The Australian staff referred constantly to the mini Ayres Rock in the garden - to which it did bear an alarming similarity, despite being clearly based on a photograph taken on a Donegal hillside.

Contrary to popular belief, I had been to Donegal once before prior to starting on *Lughnasa*. I distinctly remember sitting on the pier at Mount Charles and taking in the

Brian has extended its boundaries to a small, disused stone pier built at the turn of the century, jutting out into the Atlantic. The play demands a setting at once tangibly real yet shading off into another more mysterious 'other world' which tightens its grip as the play progresses. This pier becomes the starting point of a journey for three married couples intent on visiting a small holy island that lies just off the coast. The interweaving of their family and marital relationships is set against the unconscious potency of this mystical place, resulting in a final act that is both alarming and spiritually uplifting.

From Mount Charles to Portnoo, Rosbeg to Dunglow, and Bunbeg to



beguiling views down the coastline towards Sligo. On a round trip that took in Glenties and Killybegs, I don't recall seeing much in the landscape that would support a towering wheat field (a topographical observation made to me occasionally by ironic observers). Fortunately, for most of the audiences it was seen more as a symbol of harvest, growth and promise, and golden memories of times past, than as a real object in a real place.

So, here I am, back in Donegal, and in five days there doesn't seem to be much of the country that I haven't seen and recorded with countless photographs. This time the emphasis has been coastal, for in *Wonderful Tennessee* we are back in Ballybeg but this time

Portsalon, the piers I have stood on have been a fascinating world to observe and I hope to achieve a synthesis of elements of all in what will finally appear on stage. It would be a shame to pin Ballybeg down too accurately, for its power and charm lies in each individual's evocation of it for themselves, but as a designer the very nature of the work involves visual decisions. Working with Patrick Mason, one has learned the power of simple, eloquent statements, and certainly, given the brilliance of Brian's writing, at all times one strives to serve it with just enough to trigger it off, but never to overwhelm. I hope I can achieve the same again and am indebted to him for placing his trust in me this second time. ■