

Translating In? Brian Friel's *Translations* in Irish-language Performance

Nóra de Buiteléir (National University of Ireland, Galway)

“The sad irony, of course, is that the whole play is written in English. It ought to be written in Irish ...” (Friel, “In Interview” 80)

Should a text that is itself a translation – albeit a fictional one – be easier to translate? What happens when a play that supposedly stages the death of a language is re-enacted in that very language? Set in the Donegal Gaeltacht on the eve of the Famine and premiered in Derry in 1981, Brian Friel's *Translations* has come to establish itself as a classic of modern Irish theatre. The reasons for its commercial and critical success are relatively clear: to any audience experiencing it for the first time, *Translations* seems, superficially at least, a remarkably simple piece of theatre. It establishes for itself an easily recognisable historical and geographical setting. It seamlessly combines the comic with the philosophical. It draws on the established model of Romeo and Juliet in setting up two lovers in the face of cultural conflict. Its dialogue is easily flowing and (apparently) naturalistic, packing a strong plot into the reassuringly familiar form of the Three-Act play. It is reasonable to assume that *Translations* owes much of its popular success to the fact that it is easily accessible – *traditional*, almost. Underneath the naturalistic speech at the surface, however, is a language riddled with contradictions and ironies, a meeting place of Irish, English, Greek and Latin where translation is imperative and irresistible yet vulnerable and relentlessly destabilized. The added layer of Friel's theatrical conceit – the device whereby Irish-speaking characters speak English on stage and yet are understood to be speaking in “Irish” – can only feed the overall linguistic confusion. For *Translations* is not only *about* translation – the legitimacy of which is stretched and questioned right down through the length of the play – it *is* a translation, or at least

demands to be received as one. From the moment in Act One when Máire storms in, collapses onto a wooden stool and bemoans her inability to speak English – *in* English – the audience is forced to recognise that something somewhere on some level of the theatrical construct has been tampered with. Linguistic authenticity has been breached. From this point onwards, it is essential that the audience buy into the illusion that the lines delivered by the Irish-speaking characters on-stage are “in translation.” We know, of course, that they cannot be, that this is an original work by Brian Friel, that Brian Friel is an English-speaking dramatist who works exclusively in English, and that there is not, and never was, an Irish-language source that these lines could conceivably have been translated out *of*. But for this elaborate hoax, however, and but for the audience’s cooperation in maintaining it, neither the plot nor the dialogue of the play make any sense.

None of these complexities have prevented *Translations* crossing further linguistic borders out onto the European stage. It has been performed in French, German, Italian and Hungarian; testimony, perhaps, to the universal relevance of its treatment of the themes of language and communication. To translate a play and release it out into a major European language, however, is one thing. To translate it back into the language it pretends to have sprung from, back into the same linguistic community in which it claims to be set, is another thing entirely. Linguistic and cultural circumstances demand we approach Breandán Ó Doibhlinn’s 1981 translation of *Translations* in an entirely different way to any third-language translation of the text; the ideologies and expectations shaping an Irish-speaking audience’s reception of the play in performance are fundamentally different to those of either their English-speaking or European counterparts.

The Irish-language translator and director have, in many respects, some very obvious advantages over their European colleagues. As a translator, Ó Doibhlinn enjoys the unusual privilege of a perfect knowledge of both the source and target language. Both he and potential directors can count on audience familiarity with the cultural and historical background to the play. There is no obligation to “relocate” the text so as to facilitate audience comprehension;¹ the audience speak the language of Ballybeg, share its culture and understand its history. Both of the productions to be discussed here – that of *Aisteoirí na Tíre* in 1981 and that of *Aisling Ghéar* in 2002 – made a point in their tour schedules of bringing the play “home” to its own imagined setting in the Donegal Gaeltacht. This extreme degree of audience familiarity, however, is both a benefit and a drawback. Given that Irish-language monoglots are practically extinct in contemporary Ireland, a prospective production team has to deal with the fact that the audience is completely familiar with the original language of Friel’s play. In many cases they may even be familiar with the original play itself. An Irish-language production does not serve the same purely practical purpose as a French or German one. An Irish audience does not *need* a translated version of the play in the same way that a foreign-language audience clearly does. So why perform it in Irish at all? Does an Irish-language performance succeed in opening up new perspectives on the text? Or is it a deliberate linguistic provocation on the part of Irish-language movement, a gesture, as Friel’s *Manus* might say, “just to indicate [...] a presence?” (Friel, *Translations* 391).

¹ Continental translators and directors have negotiated the cultural difficulties thrown up by Friel’s play in a number of ways. Théâtre de l’Événement’s 1984 production for example, directed by Jean-Claude Amyl from a translation by Pierre Laville, featured French-speaking peasants drinking *eau-de-vie* rather than poteen, dancing *gigues* and *matelottes* rather than reels and hornpipes, and calculating distances in the *kilometres* that were as yet entirely unheard of in Donegal in the 1840s (Friel/Laville 1984).

While an examination of the re-contextualization of *Translations* into any foreign-language setting is illuminating,² there can be little question that the case of Irish-language reception is the most interesting and the most problematic of them all. It is problematic precisely because Irish is *not* a language foreign to the play. Although almost entirely absent from the original English text, Friel encourages his audiences to catch glimpses of Irish through layers of (imagined) translated dialogue, to constantly distinguish between English spoken as Irish and English spoken as English, to take an interest in the history and in the fate of the Irish language as it starts to crumble in the face of an English-speaking modern age. While foreign-language performances cannot but move out and away from Friel's text, incurring an emotional distance as well as a geo-historical one,³ Irish-language productions move in the other direction, closing in on the themes of the play in an uncomfortably intimate way. In investigating how *Translations* has been received into the Irish language and subsequently out onto the boards of the Irish-language stage, it is worth considering the notion of reception from various perspectives; that of the translator, making sense of an original text so as to recast it along the lines of his own interpretation; that of the director, taking this translated text and re-contextualising it on stage; and that of the audience, its responses shaped by its own beliefs and sensitivities, by its collective stance towards the historical background of the play, the questions raised by the play, and in this case, the very language of the play.

² See Nóra de Buiteléir, *From Ballybeg to Ballybabel: Translating In and Out of Brian Friel's Translations* (Trinity College Dublin, 2006) from which the early sections of this paper have been adapted.

³ Belfast director David Grant has argued that the distancing effect of foreign-language staging can be highly constructive. Discussing his experience of bringing *Translations* to the Hungarian-speaking minority in Cluj-Napoca in northern Romania, Grant insists that the production vindicated his own theory that "the use of a third language would actually serve to clarify the bilingual reality that was being represented on stage" (Grant 53). Whether or not this reality actually asks to be "clarified" is, in light of Friel's embracing of confusion and linguistic ambiguity, highly questionable.

The process of reception starts with the translator. He is the original audience member, the first to grapple with the text and to draw on his own resources to make some kind of sense of it. Forced to prioritize certain aspects of the text and sacrifice others, it is the translator's interpretation of a play that is passed on to the potential director who in turn makes it the basis of his own representation. What is perhaps most significant about Ó Doibhlinn's version of *Translations*, however, is not how well he translated it, but that he saw fit to translate it in the first place. An Irish translation is not, as noted earlier, in any way technically necessary for the play to be brought to Irish audiences. Lionel Pilkington goes so far as to claim that "it is the audience's acceptance of English as a theatrical convention for Irish and the recognition that this convention is itself a matter of theatrical expediency that serves as Friel's most convincing demonstration of the inevitability of the loss of Irish as a contemporary spoken vernacular" (Pilkington 218).

Read in this light, the imposition (or re-imposition) of the Irish language in Ó Doibhlinn's translation would appear to contradict the very subject matter of the play. Does this contradiction damage and undermine Friel's text, however, or does it in fact respond to it and question it in a valid way? Anyone in a position to understand *Aistriúcháin* is unlikely to be entirely convinced of the "inevitability" of the loss of Irish. Pilkington may be slightly too quick here in identifying Friel's own recognition of this loss. The Irish-English movement in the play, anticipated by the interplay of Greek and Latin in Hugh Mor's classroom, is arguably more indicative of historical language shift than of definitive language loss. Friel's tactic of putting the classical languages back into the vernacular (as illustrated by the banter of Hugh Mor and Jimmy Jack) is a direct challenge to the unhelpful label of "dead" languages. If Greek and Latin can sit up and talk back at us from the grave, cannot Irish do much the

same? In an article marking the 2006 centenary of Mairtín Ó Cadhain, Declan Kiberd points out that the Irish language has been pronounced dead by every generation of Irishmen since the Flight of the Earls in 1607. The problem, he continues, is that Ireland is a country where “the dead seem to never know that they are dead” (Kiberd 16). If this is true of the lively classical corpses in *Translations* then it is equally true of the supposedly extinct Irish voice that chatters its way right through *Aistriúcháin*. Pilkington is right in suggesting that Friel’s replacing of Irish with English in the text is an acknowledgement of contemporary linguistic conditions in Ireland, but wrong in assuming that the play kills off Irish entirely. The dramatist’s provocative exposition of classical elements in the dialogue opens a door to the possibility of language reincarnation; it is through this door that Ó Doibhlinn’s translation appears.

The very existence of *Aistriúcháin* is something of a political statement, a challenge to the hegemony of English in Ireland and on the Irish stage and a demand for recognition and for linguistic equality.⁴ The audience is obliged to buy into the idea that the English-speaking characters are speaking English in the very same way that an English-speaking audience buys into the idea that the Irish-speaking characters are speaking Irish. “Translated” speech is shown up against “authentic” speech along much the same lines in the two texts, denying the audience any opportunity to suspend their linguistic disbelief. In this respect, the experience of watching *Aistriúcháin* comes far closer to that of watching the original *Translations* than does the inevitably more distanced experience of watching a third-language translation.

⁴ Benedict Anderson describes how the widespread emergence of bilingual dictionaries in the nineteenth century “made visible an approaching egalitarianism among languages – whatever the political realities outside, within the covers of the [...] dictionary the paired languages had a common status” (Anderson 71). The mounting trend in recent years of staging classic plays in minority-language translation – be it Friel in Irish, Moliere in Scots Gaelic or Beckett in Guadeloupian Creole – can be read as a three-dimensional expression of that same principle.

Friel represents an absent Irish in the play through a Hiberno-English that is audibly different from the British English of the native anglophones; Ó Doibhlinn takes this intralingual distinction and develops it using his own resources. His peasants communicate in their native Donegal dialect. Lancey and Yolland, the outsiders who are understood to speak only English, use an unmistakably Munster Irish. This strategy has the effect of both maximising richness of expression and of placing the dialogue in an established Irish context where misunderstandings between dialects are a very familiar feature of Gaeltacht life. Ó Doibhlinn exploits the theatrical possibilities of this with considerable skill, harnessing the existing rivalries between various dialects to release a comic potential dormant in the equivalent English-language lines. This is a shrewd reception strategy on his part, anticipating the audience's enjoyment of such interregional linguistic jostling:

YOLLAND: What do you call it? Say the Irish name again?

OWEN: Bun na hAbhann.

YOLLAND: Bun na hAbhann.

OWEN: Again.

YOLLAND: Bun na hAbhann.

OWEN: That's terrible, George.

YOLLAND: I know. I'm sorry. Say it again.

OWEN: Bun na hAbhann.

YOLLAND: Bun na hAbhann.

OWEN: That's better... (Friel, *Translations* 410)

Most productions in the English-speaking world would probably opt to have Yolland speak with an identifiably English accent. Many productions, in Ireland at least, would more than likely play up the contrast by giving Owen an audibly Irish one. It should be clear at this point then, that what Owen is doing is correcting Yolland's English pronunciation of Bun na hAbhann to correspond with his own native way of pronouncing it. This correction, however, takes on a whole new dynamic when *both* characters speak Irish fluently:

YOLLAND: Bun na hAbhann.

EOGHAN: Tá sé sin millteanach, a Sheoirse.

YOLLAND: Tá fhios agam. Tá brón orm. Abair arís é.

EOGHAN: Bun na hAbhann.

YOLLAND: Bun na nAbhann.

EOGHAN: Tá sin níos fearr ... (Friel, *Aistriúcháin* 31-32)

It is clear from the context here that the only way to distinguish between the native and the foreign pronunciation of the placename is to have the actors use different accents. These have already been specified by the dialogue, so the only way for this correction to make any sense on stage is to have Yolland start off by saying “Bun na hAbhann” in his own native Munster tones and be gradually forced by Eoghan to imitate the same words in an Ulster accent. This act of self-correction within a native language is both in keeping with the ironies of Friel’s play and a source of potential humour. The triumph of the Ulster dialect is bound to draw some kind of reaction from the audience – not least from linguistically patriotic Northerners.

Yolland and Lancey, meanwhile, each draw on the same distinguishing features of Munster Irish; the reshaping of the standard *seo* into *so*,⁵ for example, *Gaolainn* instead of *Gaeilge*⁶ and *san* instead of *sin*.⁷ Within this shared dialect, however, Ó Doibhlinn succeeds in drawing out their opposing linguistic sympathies, elements absent in Friel’s text and yet very much in keeping with it. Friel’s Yolland is a hibernophile, fascinated by the sounds and etymologies of the Irish language and frustrated by his inability to speak it. He displays his affection for the language by taking pleasure in enunciating the place names of the area and by symbolically correcting his own pronunciation of *Ballybeg* to *Baile Beag* (Friel, *Translations* 416).

⁵ English: *this*

⁶ English: *Irish* (used in reference to the language rather than to the nationality)

⁷ English: *that*

Ó Doibhlinn's Irish-speaking Yolland does not yet have access to the name *Ballybeg* and is thus unable to formulate this correction. The impact of his enthusiasm for the Irish language, meanwhile, is somewhat muffled by the unavoidable fact that he already speaks it fluently. In a canny move, the translator compensates for this loss by introducing a parallel movement in the dialogue whereby Yolland, the fluent speaker of Munster Irish, starts to develop obvious sympathies for Donegal dialect. Just as his English-speaking counterpart delights in "picking up the odd word" (411), so the Irish-speaking Yolland starts to use some of the same phrases and pronunciations of the people around him. When he mentions to Eoghan that a little girl spat at him on the street, for example, the term he uses is not the usual *cailín* or the Munster *gearrchaile* but the unmistakably Ulster *girseach*. When Máire re-appears and addresses him in "Irish" he is as bashful and confused as ever, but this time he formulates his lack of comprehension with the Donegal "Goidé atá á rá aici?" rather than the more obvious *cad atá á rá aici*.⁸

Lancey's speech betrays none of this local solidarity. His Irish bears the traces of another influence entirely – English. It is with unmistakable irony that Friel deliberately fills the cartographer's speech in English with words of Greek and Latin origin – *majesty, government, topographical, survey* – classical languages he does not himself actually speak. In much the same way, Ó Doibhlinn's Lancey speaks an Irish full of gaelicized English words, traces of a language that he does not so much not speak, but is not allowed to speak as a result of the theatrical conventions of the play. Lancey's English influences can be seen in his fondness for words like *conclúid, gobhairmint, úinéir* and *mapa*.⁹ There is nothing in any way wrong with these words. They are absolutely valid terms in Irish. What makes them special, however, and what

⁸ English: *What's she saying?*

⁹ English: *conclusion, government, owner, map.*

distinguishes them from the vocabulary employed by the rest of the characters in the play, is that they wear their English-language origins visibly. The translator could easily have opted for the more commonly-used Irish words of *focail scoir*, *rialtas*, *sealbhóir* and *léarscáil*. In choosing the words he does, however, Ó Doibhlinn is offering more than a response to the etymological patterns set by Friel in the speech of the original Captain Lancey. The presence of these words in the text actively foregrounds the English influences contained within the Irish language, just as Friel's showcasing of Hiberno-English illustrates the reverse.

Despite translating “in,” or indeed precisely because of translating “in,” Ó Doibhlinn's text is probably as nuanced and linguistically complex as any recasting of Friel's original could hope to be. *Aistriúcháin* continues to be something of a favourite with amateur Irish-language theatre groups; to date, however, none have drawn much by way of critical success. In reviewing the reasons for this, and in moving this investigation of the reception of *Aistriúcháin* from the page out onto the stage, I shall focus here on two productions; that of *Aisteoirí na Tíre*¹⁰ in 1981, and that of the Belfast-based *Aisling Ghéar*¹¹ company in 2002. *Aisteoirí na Tíre* premiered the play in *Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe* in September 1981 before touring it around Limerick, Dublin, and the Donegal Gaeltacht town of Gaoth Dobhair. Despite the production drawing respectably-sized audiences, the response of both the Irish- and English-language press was decidedly muted. The reaction of the *Irish Times*, the country's most respected broadsheet, speaks volumes about the position of Irish-language theatre in Ireland. A week before *Aisteoirí na Tíre*'s production arrived in Dublin, the paper's much-loved *Irishman's Diary* column ran an enthusiastic, faintly whimsical piece on the project, featuring snippets of interviews with representatives

¹⁰ English: *The Folk Actors*

¹¹ English: *Bitter Vision*

of the theatre company and with Friel himself (Kiely 9). This was something of a publicity coup for Aistoirí na Tíre, as the *Irishman's Diary* was and remains one of the most widely-read columns in the most influential daily newspaper in the country. Curiously, the newspaper chose not to review *Aistriúcháin* when it opened in Dublin some time later. None of the other English-language national papers bothered either. Where the play did meet with a certain amount of critical attention was – predictably enough – in the Irish-language press. Here again, though, the reaction says far more about the poverty of Irish-language theatre than about either the power of Friel's play or the accomplishment of Ó Doibhlinn's translation. Nóirín ní Nuadháin's review in *Comhar* draws attention to the rushed nature of the production and the poor standard of the acting, comparing it unfavourably to the “*draíocht*” [magic] of Field Day's inaugural production of the previous year (Ní Nuadháin 15). The bulk of her article, however, celebrates the fact that the play is being performed at all, that audiences are getting the chance to see it at all, that theatre in Irish is even *possible* at all. The actors might not be convincing, she argues, but they are certainly putting in a titanic effort (“*ag cuir dua orthu fhéin*”) and this is to be admired. Her review, despite being fundamentally negative, ultimately emerges as rather positive. This, she seems to suggest, is a rather mediocre production of a play you would probably rather see in English but feel a certain duty to go see in Irish. The actors are not particularly good. But – *but!* – aren't they great all the same?

If the critical reception of *Aistriúcháin* in 1981 was marked by this mixture of condescension and apathy, then much the same reaction was measured out to Aisling Ghéar's production twenty years later. Again, the *Irish Times* published what can only

be described as a novelty piece¹² about the production; again it neglected to grant it the dignity of an actual review. Again, the Irish-language press drew attention to the production as a welcome “occasion” (Ó Cairealláin 4); again its reviewers proved reluctant to discuss the performance critically (Ó Liatháin 10). This is curious, given that Aisling Ghéar – the island’s only professional Irish-language theatre company – staged a version of the play which was not only far more technically polished than that of Aisteorí na Tíre, but that took considerable liberties with Friel’s original linguistic vision. To understand how two quite fundamentally different performances could be met with much the same critical reaction requires a certain understanding of the status of Irish-language theatre in Ireland and of the make-up of its audiences. One of the advantages – or disadvantages – of producing this kind of theatre is that the assumptions to be made about audience and critics are far safer and more predictable than in the case of anglophone theatre. There is a blunt reason for this. Despite the unmistakable presence of Irish that hovers around the classic works of Synge, Murphy and Friel himself, despite the ready availability of Irish-speaking actors and the fact that many of the country’s most influential theatre-makers are Irish enthusiasts (Fiach Mac Conghail, artistic director of the Abbey and one of the most powerful figures in Irish theatre is a native speaker), theatrical production in the first official language is not generally taken terribly seriously in Ireland. This can be put down to the fact that theatre, unlike lyric poetry, has no historical tradition in Irish. It was virtually invented out of nowhere by language enthusiasts such as Douglas Hyde and Augusta Gregory during the Gaelic Cultural Revival of the late nineteenth century, and despite the fervent support of the fledgling Irish State in the 1920s and 1930s, the establishing of the Taibhdhearc as the National Irish-language theatre, and

¹² “Nice Translation,” *The Irish Times Online* 3 Aug. 2002, 10 Aug. 2007 <<http://www.ireland.com/weekend/2002/0803/102774202214.html>>.

the provision of generous arts funding, it has never come to pose any serious challenge to Irish theatre in English.¹³ It is for this reason that the press in Ireland tends to treat Irish-language theatre as a novelty rather than as an object for serious critical attention. The Irish-language press meanwhile, mindful of representing a linguistic culture under constant threat, is understandably slow to appear overly critical of any attempt to promote the language through theatre. Any cultural activity in Irish tends to be welcomed by the language movement, a generous and inclusive policy which can sometime backfire in facilitating works of questionable artistic merit. It is, as the argument goes, all *ar son na cúise* (for the good of the cause), the cause in this case being nothing less than the struggle for linguistic survival.

If the *ar son na cúise* argument influences those who make and promote Irish-language theatre, then it influences those who consume it all the more so. While any prospective *Aistriúcháin* audience is likely to include the usual selection of theatre fanatics and Friel buffs, it will also almost certainly feature a sizable quota of Irish-language enthusiasts who are very much Irish-speakers first and theatre-goers second. Baldly put, plays in Irish are frequently patronized by people who would never consider going to see a play in English. This backbone of the Irish-language faithful – filling the theatres for what some may consider all the wrong reasons, but filling them nonetheless – is the reason that Aisteoirí na Tíre’s underwhelming *Aistriúcháin* made healthy box-office returns in 1981. In 2002, however, Aisling Ghéar decided not only to draw on the support of the *ar son na cúise* language-loyalists, but to acknowledge and actively indulge them. Aisling Ghéar showed their audiences what they knew

¹³ The underdeveloped condition of drama and theatre in Irish is starkly reflected by the dearth of relevant scholarship on the subject. Pádraig Ó Siadhail’s *Stair Dhrámaíocht na Gaeilge: 1900-1970* (Indreabhán, Conamara: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 1993) is the only monograph to have been published on the subject to date.

their audiences wanted to see – even if this was quite categorically *not* what Friel had wanted them to be shown.

Aisling Ghéar’s production was in many ways the production that Aisteoirí na Tíre’s had wanted to be. Ó Doibhlinn’s translation was originally commissioned as a bilingual piece, the idea being that the groups on stage would express themselves through their respective native tongues. “I would have thought,” remarked company manager Colm Ó Tórna to *The Irish Times* at the time, “that the jokes would have been even more obvious using both languages, especially as Aisteoirí na Tíre will be performing to audiences who understand both [...] but the author may think that it [the two-for-one conceit] is an intrinsic part of his play” (Kiely 9). Friel most certainly did feel that it was an intrinsic part of his play and refused permission for the translation. “Otherwise it doesn’t make sense,” he protested, “the conceit is part of the strange logic of the play” (Kiely 9). Ó Torna is right in suggesting that the clash of two languages on-stage would make the jokes and puns “more obvious” – this, in fact, is the problem. An Irish/English performance of *Translations* is *too* obvious, too natural, and forces the play into precisely the kind of restrictive, straightforward realism that Friel deliberately avoided in writing the play – and that, in 2002, Aisling Ghéar actively sought in staging it. Company founder Gearóid Ó Cairealláin explained to the *Irish Times* that a bilingual staging “sets the play in its realistic setting,” and more forcibly brings home “the brutality of the way the English language was forced onto the Irish speakers”.¹⁴ And so in Aisling Ghéar’s *Aistriúcháin* the English soldiers speak English, the Irish peasants speak Irish, and, as

¹⁴ For full interview with Ó Cairealláin and director Bríd ní Ghallachóir see “Nice Translation,” *The Irish Times Online*, 3 Aug. 2002, 10 Aug. 2007 <<http://www.ireland.com/weekend/2002/0803/102774202214.html>>

a gesture towards monoglot anglophones, simultaneous translations are provided through headphones.

On a purely theatrical level, this shedding of Friel's two-for-one language device has massive consequences for the audience's experience of the play. In the performance's Northern Irish context, however, it is the political ramifications of such a move which are of most interest to us in our investigation of the play's reception. Here it is necessary to draw some dividing lines between Southern Irish audiences watching *Aisteoirí na Tíre*'s production in 1981 and Northern Irish audiences¹⁵ sitting down to see *Aisling Ghéar* twenty years later. Whereas Irish in the Republic has come to shed its traditional nationalist associations and grow increasingly cosmopolitan, north of the border it remains a symbol for republicanism and opposition to British rule. The prominence with which leading members of Sinn Féin wear the *fáinne*¹⁶ attests to this. So while a director in the South can assume that an *Aistriúchain* audience will be made up predominantly of language enthusiasts, his northern counterpart can take it as a given that *his* northern audience, simply by virtue having opted to attend a play in Irish in the first place, will be drawn almost exclusively from the nationalist community. Even the provision for simultaneous translation is unlikely to open any Irish-language production up to a Unionist audience. *Aisling Ghéar*'s performance space is situated in the Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich on the Falls Road; Northern Ireland has, unfortunately, not yet reached that point where members of the Protestant community can feel entirely at ease attending a theatre in the heart of nationalist West Belfast. In staging *Aistriúchain* bilingually then, *Aisling Ghéar* pitched a nationalist interpretation of the play at a nationalist-dominated audience.

¹⁵ While *Aisling Ghéar* did in fact tour the Republic – and the Scottish Western Isles – with the play, the production was conceived as part of the West Belfast Féile an Phobail (Community Festival) and both the cast and production team were very much dominated by Northerners.

¹⁶ A small metal ring worn pinned to the lapel to indicate that the wearer speaks Irish. They can be coloured, silver or gold, depending on level of fluency.

Director Bríd ní Ghallachóir's explanation that "déanann sé an coimhlint idir an Gaeilge agus an Béarla an-soiléar"¹⁷ is a statement of intent. And this intent was never Friel's intent. *Translations*, as he went to great lengths to clarify, "has to do with language and only language. And if it becomes overwhelmed by political elements, it is lost" (Friel 1979). Staged in Irish, *Aistriúcháin* remains a play about language. Staged in both Irish and English, it cannot be received by the audience as anything other than a play specifically about the historical relationship between Irish and English, an emotive subject which cannot but generate political meaning in a Northern Irish context. Ironically, it is when English is allowed a voice that it announces itself the enemy. Aisteoirí na Tíre's *Aistriúcháin*, for all its technical failings, makes a case for the durability of the Irish language. Adhering to Ó Doibhlinn's painstakingly accurate translation, it demonstrates that Irish can express Friel's theatre as clearly as English can, that the two tongues are cultural equals, that Irish is by no means dead. In Aisling Ghéar's self-consciously realist rendering, however, Irish is stone-dead – because English kills it and the audience witnesses the killing.

Twenty-seven years ago Brian Friel was instrumental in founding the Field Day theatre company, a bringing together of Northern Irish artists from both communities in an effort to promote a "Fifth Province" of the mind, a theatrical common ground where Irish and Northern Irish of traditionally antagonistic traditions could come together to question the basis of the factors dividing them. *Translations* was their maiden performance; the Catholic Friel dedicated the play to his Protestant friend, the actor, Stephan Rea. When *Translations* opened in Derry that year, it was celebrated as a theatrical occasion for both communities, lauded by the local papers

¹⁷ English: it [the bilingual performance] makes the conflict between Irish and English very clear.

on both sides and packed out every night with punters from both the Bogside and the Waterside. The play was met with thunderous applause on its opening night – legend has it that it was the Unionist mayor of the time who led it. It is sobering to reflect that a play that marked a moment of cultural reconciliation at the height of the troubles could come to deliberately exclude a Unionist audience and serve instead to further perpetuate some of the us-and-them myths of nationalist history. Some hope, however, rests in the fact that the version crafted by Breandán Ó Doibhlinn – himself, like a Friel, a native Derryman, but also a classicist, a Professor of Modern Languages and very much a representative of the more cosmopolitan branch of the Irish-language movement – remains an exemplary piece of translation and a sound basis for productions in the future. The Irish language, one hopes, has not finished with Friel quite yet.

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