
FRIEL REIMAGINED
Playwriting Resources

Such a dude

Very relatable

**Lesson ideas & creative exercises for school & community writing groups
inspired by the plays & process of Brian Friel**

Dr Emily DeDakis

Commissioned by the Friel Reimagined Project, July 2023

www.qub.ac.uk/sites/friel-reimagined/teaching-resources/

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Welcome

‘I think I’ve got the scent of the new play. Scarcely any idea of character, plot, movement, scene; but a definite whiff of the atmosphere ... something stirring in the undergrowth.’

Brian Friel, diary entry from 7 November 1976, while writing *Aristocrats*

How does a writer transform the tiniest seed of an idea into a full story and a compelling script for performance? In his published plays and a fascinating behind-the-scenes archive of his work, Brian Friel has left us a collection of possible answers. These teaching resources, created by writer and dramaturg Dr Emily DeDakis, give students the tools to explore the playwriting process via their own original ideas, taking cues from one of Ulster’s finest and most prolific playwrights — and (as one 16-year-old writer who visited the *Friel Reimagined* exhibition in 2022 discovered), a relatable dude. His approach is full of fresh windows into playwriting.

17 creative-writing activity ideas inspired by 7 of Friel’s plays

Recommended for ages 15 to adult*

These exercises take a writer’s-eye view of the plays, using Friel’s creative pathways and finished works as springboards for original pieces of student writing. Students will have the chance to unpack elements of Friel’s creative process and experiment with effective techniques they can apply to their own ideas. Accessible for all students, regardless of their writing experience, it’s also a wonderful chance for those already into creative writing and drama to further develop their skills and knowledge.

***Created for workshops with GCSE and A-Level classes and adult writers — can be adapted for younger ones too:** You’ll be surprised what they come up with when given the chance and time to write freely

Suggestions

This resource collection can be used flexibly, with basic outlines to adapt based on the needs of the group and time available. You could approach it as a:

- **Pathway** — exploring all the exercises over time with a single group, guiding work on individual or collective scripts
 - finding ideas and building a writing process
 - developing settings, characters and scenes
 - experimenting with dialogue techniques
 - structuring a longer piece of scriptwriting
 - scaffolding the revision and sharing of creative work in progress
- **Menu** — cherry-picking lessons to incorporate as one-off explorations within general literature, drama and creative-writing lessons
- **Starting point** — developing your own hands-on, creative lessons inspired by other writers and their work, within the curriculum and beyond

Most exercises are geared toward individual/solo work, however many could be adapted for small group or collective writing.

Find ways to encourage a range of perspectives from the class, creating space for students who may be less likely to join in or speak out: All stories are welcome and important on our stages and each writer deserves to have their voice heard.

Dramaturgy

This collection of exercises and lesson ideas draws on Friel's notebooks and plays, and other academic and creative responses to the archive. It arose from playwriting workshops developed by dramaturg Emily DeDakis, delivered to post-primary students and adult writers in Belfast and Derry~Londonderry as part of the Friel Reimagined project and exhibition in 2022-'23. Here is some background on the practice of dramaturgy and Emily's experience.

'A dramaturg is a dedicated person on the creative team whose primary task is to support the play's development by asking key questions, starting conversations, researching, providing context, and helping the artists as they work together to tell the intended story.'

Beehive Dramaturgy

When they help develop a new play, a dramaturg's role might be described as a story designer:

- Talking with the playwright about their vision
- Asking questions that support their writing process
- Getting deep into their idea as it grows into a story and then a play, exploring what will make it the strongest story it can be
- Keeping the vision and meaning clear so the creative team can experiment freely
- Acting as an outside eye in rehearsals, focusing on the audience experience
- Creating written material that introduces or explores a play, like research/background documents, programmes, lobby displays and learning resources

Dr Emily DeDakis (she/her)

is a freelance dramaturg from the United States, based in Belfast since 2005. As a producer and dramaturg in NI, she has produced rehearsed readings, 15-minute and 24-hour play festivals and playwrights' bootcamps, and developed dozens of new scripts and performances including verbatim, dance, immersive and devised theatre. DeDakis has worked with theatre companies including Accidental, Terra Nova, Prime Cut, Dumbworld and Sole Purpose (NI), Scene + Heard and Droichead Arts Centre (ROI), foolsFURY and Golden Thread (USA) and taught playwriting at places like Queen's University Belfast, Ulster University, Fighting Words, John Hewitt Summer School and Chautauqua Institution. Her writing has been broadcast on BBC radio and television, and she often collaborates with musicians and sound artists. www.haveyouthoughtabout.co.uk

Part 1

The Playwright

[Background]

Friel Facts

Brief context about Brian Friel and his work – useful as an intro before any one-off lessons

Meet the Playwright

- Born in Omagh, Co. Tyrone (1929)
- Educated in Maynooth & Belfast; taught maths in Derry~Londonderry
- Published stories in *The New Yorker* before turning more fully to playwriting for radio & stage
- Poured himself into learning to be a playwright, studying drama at the Tyrone Guthrie Theater (Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA)
- Died in Greencastle, Co. Donegal (2015)
- Lived for 86 years and filled them with theatre

The Chekhov of Ulster?

- An incredibly thoughtful and prolific playwright: authored 29 full-length plays
- Wrote about family ties, communication & myth-making - all of which he saw as absolute human needs
- He was fascinated by the tangled relationships between narrative, history & nationality
- Often compared to Russian playwright Anton Chekhov (1860-1904), & eventually adapted some of his work (*Uncle Vanya*, *The Yalta Game* & *The Bear* among others)

Plays

- *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964) was his first big success
- *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) won Olivier & Tony awards for best play
- Other notable works include:
 - *Lovers* (1967)
 - *The Freedom of the City* (1973)
 - *Faith Healer* (1979)
 - *Translations* (1980)
 - *Molly Sweeney* (1994)
 - *The Home Place* (2005)

Reading Friel Like a Writer

- Surprisingly adventurous as a dramatist, despite being born nearly 100 years ago in rural Ireland
- Finds intensity in absence: the unsaid, the skirted-around, the instead-of & in-spite-of
- Portraying moments that feel absolutely true-to-life even when using techniques that are not pure realism

Showing Up

- Writing takes practice
- Friel showed up at his writing desk & spent time with his ideas
- He let them come to life gradually but he also made demands of them, and had very clear ideas about what he wanted his plays to be:
 - *Translations* needed to be character-driven (not just a lecture on colonialism)
 - *The Freedom of the City* should be 90% comedy

“Such a dude. Very relatable.”

-16-year-old writer from Belfast, after visiting the *Friel Reimagined* exhibition

We think the greats are just plain geniuses

While talent, drive, luck and privilege can all play a part in how famous or commercially successful a writer (or any artist) is, there's a lot happening under the bonnet, making their engines go — and some of it is very familiar to everyone: a remarkable combination of nerves & mistakes & courage & missteps & inspiration & anxiety & serendipity & despair & euphoria & just plain work. They did not always think they could do it either. Friel's honesty about that, and his generosity in sharing his notebooks, is a not-so-tiny, more-than-beautiful miracle for theatre artists (and other curious people too).

[Questionnaire]

More You is Always Better

Who you are, what you like, and what you want to write

Q&A

Friel was constantly asking himself questions during the writing process, writing them down and answering himself: from small questions about characters to 'bigger, knottier' questions about 'the core of the play', he was very open about not knowing everything from the start, figuring it out as he went along

'I don't want to write anymore.'

-Brian Friel, rehearsal diary for *Faith Healer*, Saturday 24th February 1979, after two preview performances did not go well.

Spoiler:

Friel did keep writing: The following year he wrote one of his most famous plays, *Translations*. Ten years after that, he wrote the award-winning *Dancing at Lughnasa*. And he wrote another 10 plays after that. But there were plenty of days he couldn't see where the road was leading.

Writing is a tough adventure & a long road

- Difficult at times, exhilarating at others — we're learning from the past and making our own rules
- Even when we plan ahead, we don't always know what road we'll end up on, or exactly where it's heading — and that is absolutely fine
- It helps to know who you are, what stories you want to tell, and why you want to tell them

'More you is always better.'

-Jillian Walker (U.S. playwright)

'Follow your own fascinations. Trust them.'

Create whatever causes a revolution in your heart.'

-Elizabeth Gilbert (U.S. author)

Write your answers to these questions

- Understanding the ways your mind works / discovering what gives you a creative buzz
 - Recognising your unique knowledge / finding your style as a playwright
 - Your own identity, experiences, homes and stories are valid and have power: you belong, whoever you are
 - Don't think too hard - these are just for you: You'll only share what you want to (if anything)
 - Answer the questions any way you like and write as much as you want to
- What do you see yourself as? (ex. a sibling, a clown, an artist, a daredevil?)
 - How do others see you? (relationships, jobs, hobbies, opinions)
 - What experiences inform what you know & how you see the world?

- Is there an artist or an artwork (writing, music, film, performance, game) you really love? Or hate?
- What's a play or other performance that's made you cry? What about laugh?
- What kind of stories make you angry (fictional or real life)?
- What is a very important story you think someone needs to tell?

Discussion

Talk about their answers generally; anyone who feels comfortable can share

Ask if they learned anything new about themselves

What questions were the hardest?

Exercise: Retelling]

It's How You Tell It

Everyone's way of writing is unique — even if we've heard the story before

“Write what would not have been seen were it not for you.”

-Robert Bresson (French filmmaker)

- 'Write what you know' is a great old saying — and powerful advice for any writer
- but also what you want to know, or have only imagined
- Who you are comes out no matter what, even in the stories you invent
- Even if you tell a similar story to something else you've seen, you will never tell it the same way; each person's storytelling is very unique

Friel wrote versions of works by other playwrights: many by Chekhov, and also Turgenev, Macklin and Ibsen. This is a common practice in theatre; Shakespeare's plays have had countless retellings. A number of Irish writers have created new versions of existing plays in recent years:

- Lucy Caldwell's *Three Sisters*, 2016 (after Chekhov)
- Roddy Doyle's *The Government Inspector*, 2011 (after Gogol) and *Peter Pan*, 2023 (after Barrie)

Cover Versions

Not just for musicians — playwrights also put their own spin on existing work
Bringing something new to the stage that speaks to history

Pick a fairy tale or book/film plot everyone knows, & see how everyone tells it

- Give everyone a minute or two to write their outline of the story, whatever they remember, in the order they remember it
- Encourage them to use their own words, tell it like they're telling a friend about the movie they just saw

Discussion

Have them share in pairs, &/or ask two+ students to present their version

How are the various styles different?

What kind of words or tone did they use?

What parts of the story did they add or elongate or forget?

What are other stories you'd like to try retelling?

[Discussion]

Artwork vs. Artist

Does the personal story (or personality) of an artist affect how we feel about their art? What do we need to know?

You'd learn so much more by just listening to the music

Brin Friel kept conversations about his personal life and his art very separate, on a need-to-know basis — and there was not a lot about his personal life that he felt the public needed to know

Throughout his life, Friel famously eschewed any attempt by critics to make connections between an artist's life and their work. This position reached its most public form when it became the central theme of *Performances* (2004), in which he allows the ghost of the Czech composer Janáček to vent his spleen against Anezka, a PhD student who is seeking to understand the composer's *Intimate Letters* String Quartet in the context of his unrequited infatuation with a married woman. When Anezka tries to insist that 'there must be a connection between the private life and the public work', Janáček responds with evident exasperation: 'You'd learn so much more by just listening to the music' — a sentiment that surely reflects Friel's own position.

So it feels almost disloyal to be prying into Friel's private notes...We must assume that when he entrusted his papers to the National Library of Ireland he was implicitly licensing our intellectual curiosity.

-David Grant, Keeping Faith: An Archival Exploration of the Origin of Brian Friel's Faith Healer

Art & Privacy

- Writers
 - Harper Lee's unpublished first version of the story that became her famous 1960 novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published in 2015. She never intended to make it public
 - J.D. Salinger (author of *The Catcher in the Rye*) lived a very reclusive life, keeping far from the limelight so he could focus on writing
- Musicians
 - Dolly Parton and Adele are very careful what parts of their personal life they allow to become public
 - Beyoncé has only given a handful of interviews in the past decade

Q: Is it important to know about the artist, or is the artwork enough?

- Do you often want to know more about a writer, actor, filmmaker or musician, or is it just enough to enjoy their work?
- What artists are you most curious about?
- Is there anyone you wish you hadn't found out more about?
- Ethics of social media — how much access should we have / do we need?
- Are artists under too much pressure to share, or is that part of the job?
- Are you a more private person or do you feel fine sharing?

Part 2

The Process

[Mind Map]

Under Construction

Playwrights & builders

- Playwright (noun): A writer of plays, also referred to as a dramatist. The word playwright conjoins the nouns 'wright', meaning craftsman or builder, with 'play', meaning a text written for performance. (Oxford Dictionary)
- Just like builders, playwrights need tools. Friel had some very specific ones. Rituals that made up his writing and rewriting process, but also...
- Physical materials:
 - Homemade booklets (A4 pages cut in half and held together with a treasury tag; labeled with letters of the alphabet or character names or themes)
 - Black ink for first draft, making notes in pencil or other colours
 - Wrote on right side of the page only, leaving space on the left for edits
 - Sometimes wrote on hotel notepaper (he may have taken a stash of some he liked)
- **Q:** What tools do you write with? How do the tools you use change how you write (e.g. handwriting (pen/pencil and paper), computer, phone (notes apps or texts), typewriter, large (on the floor or wall), sidewalk chalk...)

Not finished yet

While a play was in progress, he likened his new idea to a: construction site under wraps, or a creature stirring in the undergrowth

What's your idea under construction?

Think about a big idea stirring in the undergrowth, starting to take shape

Make some rough notes about it

- What's on your mind lately? How could it become a story?
- Is there a story or a setting you've never seen done before?
- What is part of your own experience or identity that you could tell?
- What kind of characters might be in it?
- What setting(s) would it happen in?
- Are there any big themes? (what Friel would call 'the core of the play'?)
- Give it a working title

Discussion

Anyone who feels comfortable can share

These ideas may form the basis for the students' explorations in the rest of the exercises

[Exercise: World-Building]

Ballybeg as Multiverse

Create a setting like Friel's fictional town: big & flexible enough to hold many ideas

Friel really loved Donegal

- Family were originally from there — mum was postmistress of Glenties
- Grew up in Derry but spent his boyhood holidays there
- 'Donegal remained for him as a powerful image of possibility, an almost pastoral place in which the principle of hope can find a source. The town of Ballybeg, which occurs so often in his plays as a standard setting, has fused within it the socially depressed and politically dislocated world of Derry and the haunting attraction of the lonely landscapes and traditional mores of rural Donegal.'
- Even if we're not writing fantasy, we invent the places we need...

Ballybeg as Friel's multiverse

- Its meaning in Irish (Baile Beag) is 'small town'
- Friel set 14 of his plays in this fictional Donegal community
- The town isn't linked to a physical place on the map - in *Molly Sweeney* it's in the far northwest; in *Dancing at Lughnasa* it's in the southwest of the county
- Multiverse is 'a hypothetical group of multiple universes' which, together, 'comprise everything that exists: the entirety of space, time, matter, energy, information, and the physical laws and constants that describe them...'
- Any- & everything can happen in a small town

Invent your own Ballybeg

A fictional place that gives you the scope to explore many ideas

- What kind of place is it (on earth, space, underwater, another dimension, a car?)
- Describe it using all five senses
- What is special about it? Does anything happen that makes it different from our world?
- Who lives or visits there?
- Whose stories can happen there?
- What would these stories be like (tone, genre, form)?

Discussion

Anyone who feels comfortable can share

Part 3

The Plays

[Exercises: Dialogue]

Everybody Wants Something and Two You

Two very different techniques for writing dialogue inspired by Philadelphia, Here I Come!

PHILADELPHIA, HERE I COME! (1964)

- Two versions of the same character to show inner conflict: Public Gar & Private Gar reveal the character's dilemma deciding whether to leave home, & exploring how we talk to ourselves vs. what we show to others
- Wanting different things: Even in the most basic situations, characters are looking in different directions & getting in each other's way
- Conflict (within self & between people & with environment) drives the story forward
- Time: moving between memory & the present moment expands the reach of the story we see on stage

'Everybody wants something. Tries to state it. Can't.'

-Brian Friel, in his notebook while writing *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*

True communication is imperfect.

- How often do we say exactly what we mean, in just the way we want it to come out?
- **Q:** Ways that human speech is messy: interruptions, lying, mishearing, ignoring...

Write a brief scene with 2+ characters, use a dialogue technique from *Philadelphia*:

1. **Everybody Wants Something.** Tries to State it. Can't: Use this realisation by Friel about the story he was writing as a rule for your characters in this scene. Think about what they want, and what they hide from each other. How does it affect their dialogue?
2. **Two You:** Your scene will include Public & Private versions of the same character. No other characters can see/hear the Private character, e.g.
 - Public: Who you are with your teachers or grandparents
 - Private: Inner voice / who you are with your best mate

Discussion

Encourage people to share who have done different exercises (perhaps taking parts and reading each other's scenes aloud)

[Exercise: Setting]

Where Matters

The secret power of where a story takes place: setting isn't simply a backdrop

THE FREEDOM OF THE CITY (1973)

A civil rights march is dispersed with teargas & three protesters (who don't know each other) end up taking shelter in the Lord Mayor's parlour at the Guildhall; outside, the army is preparing to take action against them, assuming they have occupied it and have violent intentions

WONDERFUL TENNESSEE (1993)

A deserted pier across the sea from Oileán Draíochta (Island of Otherness / Island of Mystery) - three couples have arrived via minibus, waiting for the ferryman who will take them to the island (which one of them says he has purchased)

Setting matters

- Think about the power of where a story happens
 - Croke Park vs. a local GAA pitch
 - Tour de France vs. the dirtbike course at Ormeau Park
- Inside/outside, public/private - different challenges and opportunities for a writer/designer/director, and also different kinds of meaning
- **Q:** Think about the different things that affect a place: Who may feel unwelcome there? Is it a space that is in use or derelict?

Working as a group, make two lists:

1. **Places:** Locations with inherent drama or significance. Where is somewhere you've never seen a play set — but might be amazing
2. **Situations:** Surprising or remarkable or everyday happenings that could appear in a play -- funny, scary, strange, happy, sad

Once you have a full list of each with a range of contrasting suggestions...

Match places & situations randomly; write a short scene using these pairings

- You might come up with some wild combinations: e.g. open heart surgery on a tennis court, or an exorcism at a B-movie festival (actual examples from a previous workshop)
- Discuss other possible matches, mix things up if you want to
- Writing can happen solo or in groups — give them 15 minutes to write

Discussion

Encourage people to share (perhaps taking parts and reading scenes aloud)

[Exercise: Narration]

Dear Sir

What happens when a narrator steps into or comments on the action of a play?

LIVING QUARTERS (1977)

- Irish Army commandant Frank Butler & his family at their home in rural Donegal, on the date of his being honoured for service in the Middle East
- Children & new wife have gathered, with all their various secrets & motivations
- Sir - narrator-cum-stage-manager who acts with military precision to direct the action of the play from 'the ledger'
- Absolute truth - other characters have brought Sir in to adjudicate & reveal the exact way things went on that date; of course they all want 'the truth' as long as it squares with their memory — & how they want themselves to be seen
- The characters repeatedly interrupt and tamper with the action, petitioning Sir to show a certain scene, or show them in a certain light

'And yet no sooner do they conceive me with my authority and my knowledge than they begin flirting with the idea of circumventing me, of foxing me, of outwitting me. Curious, isn't it?' -Sir

Famous narrators

Examples of films/TV/plays with a narrator (often used in musical theatre)

- Michael Evans in *Dancing at Lughnasa*
- Aaron Burr in *Hamilton*
- Grandfather in *The Princess Bride*
- Emcee in *Cabaret*
- Che Guevara in *Evita!*
- The Narrator in *Arrested Development*
- Stage Manager in *Our Town*

Try introducing a narrator

- Create a scene with someone who exists outside of & describes the realistic action
- What is their position within or angle on the situation of the play?
- Start to find their voice & how they relate to the others

Give them 15 minutes to write

Discussion

Encourage people to share (perhaps taking parts and reading each other's scenes aloud)

Exercise: Character Development

At Least 7 Questions to Ask A Character

Use Friel's method of habitual questioning to find out more about your character

FAITH HEALER (1979)

- As a seventh son, Francis Hardy is supposed to be blessed with the gift of healing. He becomes a showman, traveling around performing 'miracles'. Is it a gift? Or are the rare healings he performs simply tricks of the mind?
- Told in the form of four monologues by three characters (Hardy, his partner Grace and his manager Teddy): different perspective on the same events, places & people
- Our understanding of the story grows gradually over as each person speaks

Who are you and what do you do?

'After all this time, I don't know who he is, where he comes from, what he thinks, his name, his career, his fears and ambitions and neuroses. And until I know all those things in detail, the play doesn't exist.'

'Is a faith healer a poet, a saint, a charlatan? At what cost to himself? Is faith-healing an art? A craft? A technique? A con? ... Is he accompanied – manipulated? Impaired? Smothered? – by a brother, a mother, a girlfriend?'

-Brian Friel, questions from his notebooks while writing *Faith Healer*

At Least 7 Questions to Ask a Character

- Friel wrote lots of questions to himself, for himself to answer, as he wrote his plays
- This list is adapted from questions Friel had about his character Frank Hardy — mainly about his profession, faith healer
- Feel free to write your own list of questions — or answer someone else's list
- It's valuable to get to know your own characters from a new perspective — just like your ideas are all unique, so are the questions you would ask

- Who is this person?
- Where are they from?
- How long have they been practicing their profession?
- What is their attitude to their gift / skill?
- Why don't they stop? Could they? Why or why not?
- Do they see humour in their situation? tragedy?
- What makes this episode of their life crucial?

Writers may:

- answer these questions
- add or substitute questions of their own
- trade lists of questions with another writer
- do anything really, as long as they answer seven or more questions about their character

Discussion

Encourage people to share share their Q&As

Exercise: Monologue

A Revelation

Creating drama on stage when only one character is speaking

One at a time

- Monologue: One person speaking their own thoughts, in their unique style, at their own pace
- Bias is unavoidable - & exciting
- Irish plays that use the monologue form
 - *Faith Healer* by Brian Friel
 - *This Sh*t Happens All the Time* by Amanda Verlaque
 - *This Is What We Sang* by Gavin Kostick
 - *Limbo* by Declan Feenan
 - *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* by Annie Ryan (adapted from Eimear McBride's novel)
 - *Terminus* by Mark O'Rowe

Decisions

- Offstage people: who is not there but still important?
- Setting: where they are & who they're talking to
- Drama: If only one person can speak at a time, what makes it exciting to watch?
 - Action may lie in what is said &/or left out
 - A character might have a realisation and decide to do something, or refuse to do it

Write a monologue

While the person is speaking, there is a revelation:

They do or say something they did not expect to, which changes the course of their story

Give them 15 minutes to write

Discussion

Anyone who feels comfortable can share

[Exercise: Dialogue / Translation]

Different Languages

What happens when two people try to talk when they don't share a common tongue?

TRANSLATIONS (1980)

- Three-act play set in Ballybeg (Baile Beag), of course (Friel set 14 of his plays in this fictional Irish town)
- A group of English-speaking soldiers arrive, mapping the area and translating Irish place names into English for the British ordnance survey. One of these soldiers falls in love with an Irish girl and then mysteriously goes missing.
- Themes include love, tradition, language and communication, colonialism, and change

You've lost me

- **Q:** How many ways are there to speak a different language (literal and figurative)?
 - Actual language barrier
 - Separate or specialised knowledge
 - Political or cultural differences
 - Personal priorities & relationships (parents & kids)
 - Different generations

Write a scene for two characters who speak different languages

- Their languages can be different either literally or figuratively.
- If you're bilingual, perhaps write a scene using in both of your languages. Or monolingual folks can have some fun with Google Translate
- A possible situation could include an unlikely love story — star-crossed lovers like *Romeo & Juliet*, or the English soldier Yolland and the Irish girl Maire in *Translations*

Give them 15 minutes to write

Discussion

Encourage people to share (perhaps taking parts and reading each other's scenes aloud)

Exercise: Technology

Life as We Know It Will Never be the Same

How do the tools we use change us?

DANCING AT LUGHNASA (1990)

- August 1936 at the home of five sisters - Kate, Maggie, Agnes, Rose & Chris - and their Uncle Jack, recently returned from a mission in Uganda
- Memory & tradition: Who remembers, forgets & outlives us? What is acceptable in society?
- Dancing is a huge part of the theme & onstage action — extensive scripted choreography
- First wireless has arrived in the house; it becomes the centrepiece in some ways, as their behaviour & focus shifts
- Narrated by Chris's now-adult son Michael, remembering a formative summer: intercut with realistic scenes where the adult narrator speaks the lines of his boyhood self
- Flash forward before end of Act 2 — fitting in a story about 'progress' & history

Technology changes everything

- Think about the effects of the new wireless on the household...
- Do you remember the first time you experienced a new technology?
- Can you imagine what it would have been like to see various tech for the first time (from fire to smartphones)?

Write a scene that involves the intro of a new piece of technology

- Could be historical or invented — just needs to show characters interacting with unfamiliar tech
- Choose your invention
- What story might arise? How does it make the characters behave?

Give them 15 minutes to write

Discussion

Make a list of new tech used in each person's scene

Encourage people to share their scenes (perhaps taking parts and reading each other's aloud)

How does technology change the way we experience life, express emotions and tell stories?

[Exercise: Action / Movement]

No Words

Create a scene using only actions and movement

Music & movement

- Dance is central to *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990)
- A new wireless has been installed in the kitchen of the five Mundy sisters' house; it changes the possibilities and atmosphere of their home
- Friel wrote a number of small dance pieces into the play, and gave a detailed description of the way the dancing begins and evolves on the famous kitchen scene

'Agnes looks around, as if for permission, leaps up ... When Chris throws the surplice over her head, Kate cries out in horror – "Oh Christina" – but the sound is drowned. ... Throughout the dance, Agnes, Rose, Maggie & Chris shout-sing-call to each other above the music. Kate, alone after her initial shout, moves silently ... Maggie rubs her flour-covered fingers down her face, opens her mouth, emits a wild, raucous "Yaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" and immediately begins to dance.'

-**Act I**, *Dancing at Lughnasa*

'Each time Friel revisited his draft, new refinements and additions brought this pivotal dance scene closer to its eventual form.'

-**Bernadette Sweeney**, *Rhythm & Stillness: The Kitchen Céilí in Dancing at Lughnasa*

Language surrenders

- Friel moves outside spoken language in his use of the image of dance in the play
- The narrator, Michael, reflects on the abiding memory of his mother and aunts: 'Dancing as if language had surrendered to music... Dancing as if language no longer existed because words were no longer necessary'.

Write a scene that includes only movement and action

Something happens, but nothing is said; resist writing any dialogue
Practice making the stage directions clear for an actor to follow

Give them 15 minutes to write

Discussion

Anyone who feels comfortable can share

How does story move when there is no language?

Were there moments of emotion that may not have been as strong if there were words?

Think about ways you can incorporate more movement and action into your plays — not only relying on dialogue

Part 4

Making Progress

[Outline]

Play Architecture

An introduction to key scenes & five-act structure

Key story moments

Events that create tension & turning points in a plot of any size

- **Awakening** — inciting incident, catalyst that kicks things off [Act 1]
- **Journey** — complications & obstacles that challenge the characters [Acts 2-3]
- **Midpoint** — breakthrough, point of no return [Act 3]
- **Crisis** — worst moment, regression, all is (possibly) lost [Act 4]
- **Climax** — central struggle, obligatory scene, answers the big question [Act 5]
 - e.g. Marvel fight scene, Star Wars light sabres ('Luke, I am your father')
- **Resolution** — total mastery, a satisfying ending of some kind [Act 5]
- Break it all down & you get BEGINNING / MIDDLE / END - super simple

These are the basic building blocks — not so much rules as guidelines that we can use to underpin story structure

- In practice, they look & feel different every time; you'll find them in different ways, each part of the story is told uniquely in each play
- Not all of these plot moments happen onstage; even if they form part of the story, they may be in the past or the future, & the audience may not see them; so in a shorter piece, you may only be telling part of a bigger story, and giving hints to the rest of it
- Story can also unfold in other, equally brilliant, ways...
- You can toss out the rules, but you can't ignore the architecture of your play
- Friel is proof: Put in the time on the sketches and the blueprint and the building will stand

Create an outline for your story/script

Use the list of key scenes to tell your story -- what happens at each step?

Discussion

How do structure and key moments appear in different storylines?

Notice that your original outline might change along the way as you make progress on the story — it can always be revised

Discussion

Sharing & Reading

Connecting with fellow writers and giving each other feedback

'This has all become very formal and inhibiting. Allow the play to breathe. Let it drift as it wishes. A line on a page isn't a solemn commitment.'

'At least it is a starting point. And all starting points are arbitrary.'

'Why not?'

-Brian Friel, notes to self while writing *Dancing at Lughnasa* (May 1989)

Theatre is a collaborative artform

- Friel was a co-founder of Field Day, a collective of theatre artists who produced work together
- The best way to learn about writing for the stage is to share it, with a fellow maker or a new audience member
- Irish playwright Mark O'Rowe reminds writers not to share before they're ready; he will sometimes make as many as 10 drafts of a piece before sending it to anyone
- When you have a section you're curious about or a draft you're happy with, find a fellow writer to share it with
- Swaps are class: You can take turns, and each person will have equal skin in the game

Questions to ask of a fellow writer

- Asking a question is the best way to connect with a piece of writing in progress
- You're leaving room for their ideas to keep developing and also introducing new angles
- Keep any specific suggestions to a minimum: You're not there to write it for them the way you would do it; you're just a curious traveler, passing through their play
 - What part was the most fun to write and why?
 - What are your biggest questions about the play right now?
 - What do you think happens next?
 - Could I hear more about _____ (character, event, theme)?
 - I'm quite different/similar as a writer: Lots of times I _____.
 - I noticed _____. What was your intention with that?
 - How do you want the audience to feel a) at this point? and b) about the whole play
 - [What other questions do you have?]

Always tell them what you like, even when you have a lot of questions.

Be kind: We all know what it's like to be in a fragile place, and we all have the power to build each other up

Enjoy, be brave & make it different every time¹

¹ This is probably my best writing advice...

Source Material

Texts and sites used in the creation of these exercises, and suggested reading for further background on Friel

Brian Friel Digital Archive JSTOR

The archive reveals Friel's approaches to the mysterious playwriting process in action, showing how Friel carefully refined each successive draft on his way to creating some of the most celebrated plays of the twentieth century. The material in the archive was digitised from the Friel Papers (held at the National Library of Ireland in Dublin) by the Friel Reimagined team at Queen's University Belfast. At the time of launch the digital archive includes 2,850 scanned items, drawn from five plays. These range from initial notes on themes, narratives and characters – often jotted in pen or pencil on loose sheets – to drafts of scenes written in copybooks and typed on foolscap pages, and full play typescripts, often with handwritten revisions

[Digital archive on JSTOR](#)

Brian Friel: Essays, Diaries, Interviews 1964–1999 Faber & Faber

Edited by Christopher Murray, this delves into his work and life both before and after his landmark success with *Philadelphia*, highlighting his working processes and analysing it from a social and political perspective

[Read more on the publisher's site](#)

Collected Plays: Volumes 1-5 Faber & Faber

The definitive collection of Friel's 29 full-length plays. The first volume includes an introduction by Seamus Deane. All published in London by Faber & Faber (2016)

[Read more on the publisher's site](#)

Volume 1

The Enemy Within (1962)
Philadelphia, Here I Come! (1964)
The Loves of Cass McGuire (1966)
Lovers (Winners and Losers) (1967)
Crystal and Fox (1968)
The Gentle Island (1971)

Volume 2

The Freedom of the City (1973)
Volunteers (1975)
Living Quarters (1977)
Aristocrats (1979) (March)
Faith Healer (1979) (April)
Translations (1980)

Volume 3

Three Sisters (after Chekhov) (1981)
The Communication Cord (1982)
Fathers and Sons (after Turgenev) (1987)
Making History (1988)
Dancing at Lughnasa (1990)

Volume 4

The London Vertigo (after Macklin) (1992)
A Month in the Country (after Turgenev) (1992)
Wonderful Tennessee (1993)
Molly Sweeney (1994)
Give Me Your Answer, Do! (1997)

Volume 5

Uncle Vanya (after Chekhov) (1998)
The Yalta Game (after Chekhov) (2001)
The Bear (after Chekhov) (2002)
Afterplay (after Chekhov) (2002)
Performances (2003)
The Home Place (2005)
Hedda Gabler (after Ibsen) (2005)

Don't anticipate the ending Museum of Literature Ireland

A collaborative practice-based research project by academic researcher Dr Zosia Kuczyńska, dancer-choreographer Jessie Keenan, and performance-maker Robbie Blake. It asks whether one artist's ways of working can generate new ways of making art for contemporary practitioners through archival engagement. (Note: I think this is the best website I have ever seen.)

[About the project](#)

Field Day

A theatre collective instigated in 1980 in Derry as a cultural and intellectual response to the political crisis in Northern Ireland. The founders — playwright Brian Friel and actor/director Stephen Rea — set out to identify and develop a new audience for theatre. Friel's critically acclaimed *Translations* was the first of many Field Day plays to show at Derry's Guildhall before travelling throughout Ireland and the world. The group went on to include members Seamus Heaney, Seamus Deane, Tom Paulin, Tom Kilroy and Davy Hammond

[Read more](#)

The Geography of Brian Friel Lantern Theater Company

'Friel is never content to simply examine Ireland as it factually exists or existed... He explores more liminal dimensions of the country'

[Read the article](#)

Into the Woods: A Five Act Journey Into Story John Yorke

Not just how, but why stories work. Yorke's book (Penguin, 2013) is considered the foremost UK text on story structure and explores the unifying shape to all narrative

[About the book](#)

Performing the Body in Irish Theatre Bernadette Sweeney

An exploration via case studies that draws Irish theatre away from the tradition of literary criticism that focuses solely on language. Published by Palgrave (Macmillan) in 2008.

[About the book](#)

What is Dramaturgy? Beehive Dramaturgy

Brief description of the role of a dramaturg and the practice of dramaturgy, by NYC-based collective Beehive

[Visit the collective](#)

Friel Reimagined Queen's University Belfast

A project supported by The National Lottery Heritage Fund which digitised a selection of the Friel Papers and introduced new audiences to Friel's work. This resource was commissioned by Friel Reimagined.

[Visit the project](#)