Old Age and Aging: Presence and Absence in the Plays of Brian Friel

Giovanna Tallone

HJEAS

ABSTRACT

Old age and aging may not seem an immediate priority in Brian Friel's drama, yet several plays feature memorable characters of old, elderly, aging, or declining people, whose presence on stage is occasionally revealed through their absence. The growing cultural visibility of older people contrasts with their invisibility as useless members of society: they are physically present, yet invisible. In Friel's dramaturgy, this arouses reflection on the role of old age absent from the mimetic space and relegated to the diegetic space offstage; absence as a theatrical device marks offstage characters as potential catalysts for action. If in some plays elderly characters remain in the background, in others they become pivotal to dramatic construction, ranging from dominant figures like Columba in *The Enemy Within* (1962), to tyrannical ones such as Manus in *The Gentle Island* (1971) and Father in *Aristocrats* (1979), to social outcasts in *The Loves of Cass McGuire* (1967) and *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990). This essay considers the variety of ways in which Friel introduces or openly deals with the issues of aging and of old age through stagecraft and varied dramatic choices as well as the manipulation of mimetic and diegetic space in terms of presence and absence in particular. (GT)

KEYWORDS: Brian Friel, drama, aging studies, performativity, presence and absence in performance, mimetic and diegetic space

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The process of aging and the condition of old age may not seem to be an immediate priority in Brian Friel's dramatic work. Critical attention has been paid to aspects such as national identity, community, and gender, along with deranged and disabled characters that have been highlighted in his plays, whether "at the centre of the action or, more frequently, in peripheral roles" (Niel 143). Yet, the companion categories of old age and aging remain relatively unexplored in his *oeuvre* as they are quite a new area in literary studies at large, too, a "missing category in current literary theory" (Ingman 8). The growing attention to studies on aging features in a variety of fairly recent publications, such as Heather Ingman's study on fiction, *Ageing in Irish Writing: Strangers to Themselves* (2018) and the special issue of *Nordic Irish Studies* devoted to women and aging, where Margaret O'Neill and Michaela Schrage-Früh point out in their "Introduction" how aging "has, until recently, been curiously overlooked in Irish literary and cultural criticism" (1). Female aging

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is at the center of both Jeanette King's *Discourses of Ageing in Fiction and Feminism: The Invisible Woman* (2013) and *Ageing Women in Literature and Visual Culture* edited by Cathy McGlynn, Margaret O'Neill, and Michaela Schrage-Früh (2017). Ground-breaking studies on aging in literature and drama are represented by the pioneering work of Valerie Barnes Lipscomb, both in the volume published jointly with Leni Marshall in 2010 entitled *Staging Age: The Performance of Age in Theatre, Dance, and Film* and in her own more recent book, *Performing Age in Modern Drama* (2016). Lipscomb highlights the special role of aging in drama, pointing out that "issues of age and aging arise in all aspects of a play, from the script to casting and staging choices" ("Performing the Aging Self" 285). Furthermore, she underlines that if "age is performative in nature," "drama most specifically highlights age as performative" (*Performing Age* 1). The concept of performativity, first described by John L. Austin, refers to the overlapping of utterance and action: "the issuing of an utterance is the performing of an action" (6). The closeness of the adjective "performative" and the noun "performance" is embedded in Lipscomb's quotation from Aagje Swinnen and Cinthia Port's work: "Performativity defines age not only as a state of being but through acts of doing . . . [as a] repetition of behavioral *scripts*" (Swinnen and Port 12 qtd. in *Performing Age* 4, emphasis added). Lipscomb's significant use of the word "script" sheds light on the expectations of behavioral social prescription(s) in old age and in any age, implying that age is also socially and culturally constructed (Lipscomb and Marshall, "Introduction" 5).

Relying on Marvin Carlson's work *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (2004), Adele Anderson and Sofia Pantouvaki remind us that "performance can be recognized in the physical presence of one or more agents demonstrating some skills before and to an audience" (vii). Thus physical presence and acts of doing which are distinctive features of performance seem to be at odds with aging and aged characters, often invisible on stage, virtually absent. Likewise, the "growing cultural visibility of older people" (Ingman 1) contrasts with their invisibility as useless members of society: they are physically present, yet invisible. In a similar way, Safi Mahmoud Mahfouz points out the importance of "offstage characters" as "driving forces of the dramatic onstage action" and if they are "denied a stage presence" (392), absence as a theatrical device marks offstage characters as potential catalysts for action. In the case of aged and aging characters, however, the theatrical choice of absence might highlight the elderly being on the periphery of the society. Those who are unseen may often be marginalized, nearly non-existing.

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These assumptions can be stimulating when approaching Brian Friel's plays through a "gerontological lens" (Ingman 1) and provide new ground in the study of his dramatic production. This paper takes into account some of Brian Friel's plays with no strict chronological order and considers the variety of ways in which the playwright introduces or openly deals with the issues of aging and of old age through stagecraft and varied dramatic choices, in particular the manipulation of mimetic and diegetic space in terms of presence and absence. Especially an elderly character's presence on stage is generally revealed through his/her absence, which arouses reflection on the role of old age. Friel's elderly or aging characters range from dominant figures like Columba in *The Enemy Within* (1962), to even tyrannical ones such as Manus in *The Gentle Island* (1971) and Father in *Aristocrats* (1979), to social outcasts including the Mundy sisters and Father Jack in *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990). Clear distinctions may be blurred, for example, Cass in *The Loves of Cass McGuire* (1967) tries to impose herself as dominant to counteract the actual abandonment and neglect she faces in the family home.

Brian Friel investigates the issue of old age and aging in a variety of ways and in a variety of plays; memorable characters of old, elderly, aging, or declining people feature throughout his career in primary or secondary roles, representing the fragility and decline of aging, the mental disorder that often accompanies old age, the contradiction between an aging body and a still fresh mind. Examples range from the elderly monks in Iona in *The Enemy Within* to Screwballs, Madge, Aunt Lizzie, Canon O'Byrne, and Master Boyle in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1966), Cass, Gran McGuire, and the guests at Eden House in *The Loves of Cass McGuire*, District Judge O'Donnell in *Aristocrats*, the middle-aged Mundy sisters and the demented Uncle Jack in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the middle-aged couples stranded on Ballybeg pier in *Wonderful Tennessee* (1993), Tom Connolly's expectations of assessment as an elderly writer in *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* (1999), to land-owner Christopher Gore in *The Home Place* (2005). Occasionally, elderly characters are powerful patriarchs, such as Manus in *The Gentle Island*, while the fragility and bitterness of old age appear in the debilitating illness and deranged mind of Judge O'Donnell in *Aristocrats*, or in Maggie's degenerative arthritis in *Give Me Your Answer, Do!*

Two of Friel's early plays, *Crystal and Fox* (1968) and *The Enemy Within* (1962), deal with the process of aging in different ways. In the former, Friel sheds light on the bitterness of aging by juxtaposing it to performance. The play features a fit-up or traveling show of no particular distinction belonging to the eponymous and dominating Fox Malarkey, whose awareness of aging

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makes him cynical and emotionally empty. The company includes Fox's wife, Crystal's elderly and ailing father, Papa, who occasionally takes part in performances. Speaking of Papa in act 1, episode 2, Fox reflects on aging and acting, thus providing insight into the issue of performance and performers underlying Friel's later plays: "Your father's a real sage, my sweet . . . . All clowns become sages when they grow old, and when young sages grow old they turn into clowns" (23). The stylistic chiasmus underlying Fox's words combines the self-consciousness of acting and the process of aging, thus anticipating the performative nature of aging embedded in a number of Friel's plays. Relying on Judith Butler's formulation of performativity, Anna McMullan terms it as "a regulatory force" (142), a "reiteration of norms, which precede, constrain and exceed the performer" (Butler 234 qtd. in McMullan 142). Therefore, it works as a sort of behavioral script, so that considering aging characters as performers is likely to have a particular relevance for drama in terms of characterization, dramatic construction, and metadramatic reflection.

In *The Enemy Within*, Friel deploys different shades of old age and aging as *leitmotifs*, taking into account both the strong and outstanding figure of the protagonist and his impending senility. Columba dominates the scene, both offstage in the diegetic space while he is being spoken about and onstage in the mimetic space. Iona is a stage where Columba is to perform a double role, as a warrior faithful to his family and as a man of God. He is in turn "a priest or a politician" (34), "Columba of Iona," and "Columba of Kilmacrenan" (62). His two identities are embedded in the double performativity expected of him, interlacing with the performativity of his body, from which he feels alienated as his health does not match with his age. When he first appears on stage, the stage directions highlight this kind of contrast and duplicity: "Columba is sixty-six but looks a man sixteen years younger. There is vitality, verve, almost youthfulness in every gesture" (15). Columba himself reiterates the contradiction between age and body: "I cannot *feel* my 66 years . . . . I am burdened with this strong, active body that responds to the whistle of the fight of the sail, the swing of the axe, the warm breadth of a horse beneath it, the challenge of a new territory" (48). The stylistic choice of the passive form "I am burdened" is magnified by the accumulation of physical activities in the form of a list, all of them belonging to the behavioral script of Columba, the warrior. The "complexity of aging identities" (Ingman 2) and the "sense of alienation from their aged bodies" are often reported by elderly people to the point of "misrecognition of their mirror image" (Lipscomb, "Performing the Aging Self" 286). In this respect

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Columba's standpoint reflects Kathleen Woodward's theory of "this reaction as the mirror stage of old age" as "an inversion of Jacques Lacan's mirror stage of infancy" (67). In the play this kind of alienation from the body is highlighted also when Columba is absent from the stage; at the beginning of act 1, Dochonna remarks: "he thinks he's young enough at sixty-six to be out at the corn" (12), with the implication that Columba does not conform to the script of his age and is not behaving his age. If "each of us performs the actions associated with a chronological age" (Lipscomb and Marshall, "Introduction" 2), Columba eludes this behavioral script, yet gradually becomes aware of himself as an older man—a process which intensifies in the development of the play. As he gains ground in the mimetic space, Columba views himself as unworthy of God for yielding to the "enemy within," leading him to the world of tribal war he is expected to take part in. The stage directions highlight a growing consciousness of unavoidable realities: "*For the first time he looks his years. Tired, weary, apathetic. His face is drawn and worried*" (58). "*At last he is old*" (59).

Old age and aging represent a structuring principle in *The Enemy Within*. Not by chance is the play set in autumn (8, 11): it is a late phase of the year and a late phase of human life, the beginning of decline, the beginning of the end. This acts as a catalyst and anticipates the recurring insistence on the aging community in dialogue and stage directions. The age of the various monks is pointed out, the scribe Caornan, who opens the play, is "*a frail old man of seventy-one years*," whose "*eyesight is weak*"; Dochonna the "*domestic manager*" is sixty-six and "*he is deaf*" (11). Their physical ailments, typical of old age, are counterpointed by Grillaan the Prior, who is "*in his sixties but straight and well preserved*" (13), and in a conversation between Columba, Grillaan, and Dochonna, the monk Fintan from Cork is mentioned as being "ninety-six" but strong "like a boy" (41).

The community itself is referred to as "a number of senile crones" (35), and when he first arrives, the novice Oswald asks: "Are all the monks old men?" (14). Similar references recur increasingly in the play, the monks in the community are "old doters" (17), and the same expression is used by Dochonna speaking of the scribe Caornan in reiterated clichés: "the old doter was five years older than me" (46). The word "doter" is a cognate with the verb "to dote," implying a decline of mental faculties, especially associated with old age, with "wet chins and shapeless feet" (48). The intensity and frequency of such patterns of references throughout the play contribute to casting attention on a reading of the play that links the protagonist's progressive inner debate, the tension between his double roles and his

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growing consciousness of aging. The play is thus an early, contextualized study of aging in Friel's dramatic work, which will be further developed throughout his career.

Another play dominated by the pervasiveness of aging is *Losers* (1967), in which Friel exploits metadramatic conventions, at the same time having an absent character interact with the characters onstage. The play is the second part of the diptych *Lovers*, whose first part, *Winners*, features the young love of a couple of teenagers. The contrast in age between the youth of Mag and Joe and the process of aging in Andy and Hanna, the middle-aged lovers, interlaces with the condition of old age and ailing in Mrs. Wilson, Hanna's invalid mother. *Losers* makes use of distinctive elements of farce (Higgins 21) to present "a kind of cartoon of Irish sex life before the country was transformed" (Kilroy 15) and to approach the issue of aging in the double perspective of middle-aged and elderly characters. Here Friel experiments with metadramatic devices: fifty-year-old Andy addresses the audience recounting his courting Hanna "*in her late forties*" (53) and the intrusion on the part of her bedridden mother. This will be enacted on stage with Andy as both external and internal narrator (Higgins 20) as he turns to the audience to introduce his story at the beginning of the play and comment upon it as the play develops, also providing a conclusion.

When the play begins, Andy is "*staring fixedly through a pair of binoculars at the grey stone wall*," "*watching nothing*" until "*he becomes aware of the audience*" (51). A "symbol of escape and isolation" (Dantanus 113), the binoculars are a dramatic choice creating a distance between the present of Andy's condition and the story he is going to tell, a sort of "confidential monologue" (Higgins 20). They also represent a sort of commentary on the observation and control enacted by Hanna's mother, Mrs. Wilson, and Cissy, her next-door neighbor, who together watch the relationship and the lovers constantly. They find the middle-aged romance socially unacceptable, thus confirming that aging is socially and culturally constructed. In fact, Andy and Hanna are expected to act or perform their age, while Andy both gives voice to and subverts the unwritten but generally accepted normative script, which prescribes the couple should follow certain standards of behavior: "people think that when you're . . . well, when you're over the forty mark, that you're passified. But aul' Hanna, by God, I'll say that for her, she was keen as a terrier in those days" (53). Hanna's old mother, Mrs. Wilson, acts as a controlling agent in the two lovers' courting, obsessively ringing her handbell to summon her daughter in moments of intimacy, as she does not think it is appropriate for Hanna and Andy's relationship to continue. The old woman remains invisible

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in the first part of the play, absent from the mimetic space and relegated to the diegetic space offstage. Her temporary lack of visibility turns into a sort of performing omnipotence as Friel manipulates space boundaries, and the absentee, alive in the diegetic space, invades the mimetic space through the reiterated and obsessive sound of her bell. Mrs. Wilson is thus present and absent at the same time before actually appearing on stage—she is audible before being visually perceived. The interaction between presence and absence increases the comic stance of the play in a sort of play-within-a-play as Andy's performance of Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is the only way to pretend that innocent conversation is going on in the living room, alongside the recitation of "bloody shopping lists" and "multiplication tables" (64), and thus prevent the offstage intrusion of Hanna's mother. The stage directions highlight the forced game pointing out that "[h]*is recitation is strained and too high and too loud—like a child in school memorizing meaningless facts. Throughout his recital, they court feverishly*" (57).

If the lovers try to elude the script ostensibly imposed on them as a middle-aged couple, old Mrs. Wilson performs her age and acts her role as an invalid, looking "*angelic*" (65) when her unseen presence is first visually revealed to the audience. The stage directions emphasize her conscious performance as she is "*propped against the pillows*," she is "*a tiny woman, with a sweet, patient, invalid's smile*," and yet "*her voice is soft and commanding*" (65), which identifies the old lady as the propelling force in Hanna and Andy's life in the dominant role she has chosen for herself. She is emblematic of the general moral picture, albeit her role is not so much chosen as a result of social construction. Even her bigotry manifest in her obsessive devotion to Saint Philomena is a form of control expressed by the cliché that "the family that prays together stays together" (66); therefore, Andy's dethroning of the saint when fully drunk is an overt act of rebellion against the *status quo*. His momentary reaction, however, does not dispel the subtext of sadness and pessimism underlying the play, as he and Hanna are stuck in an unhappy marriage, too old to free themselves from Mrs. Wilson's bondage, and will probably spend their own old age in bitterness, which makes them the losers of the play. *Losers* has a circular pattern, as it closes in the same way as it begins, with Andy staring at the wall through his binoculars. His closing words highlight the selfishly subtle but overpowering authority of Hanna's mother: "By God, you've got to admire the aul' bitch. She could handle a regiment" (77), which emphasizes the power of the elderly absentee, representative of the moral rigidity of the society, as a force preventing the couple's attempt to reach a fragment of happiness.

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In *Aristocrats* (1979), Friel reworks and enlarges his experiment with the presence and absence of the elderly character as it appears in *Losers*. In this case, District Judge O'Donnell's authority as a patriarch intertwines with the decline of old age, and in a dramaturgically similar yet more complex way, the occasionally farcical stance of *Losers* is replaced by the sad reality of a disintegrating house and a disintegrating dynasty. The protagonists, all members of the O'Donnell family, come back to their father's decaying house, Ballybeg Hall, epitome of the Catholic Big House, to celebrate the wedding of their young sister, Claire. This planned event is, however, strategically and ironically replaced by the funeral of the father, whose death marks the "collapse of Ireland's patriarchy" (Boltwood 127). A parallelism is evident in the double decline of the old house and the old man, which frustrates and nullifies the work of the American historian Tom Hoffnung, engaged in research on the Hall. The only male son, Casimir, is a "pivotal character" (O'Brien 93), a master of fiction and words, who invents an impossible past in which people like Gerard Manley Hopkins, Daniel O'Connell, George Moore, Sean O'Casey, and W. B. Yeats allegedly visited the house. By doing so, he is keeping alive the spirit of the house, in an attempt to preserve its "aristocratic ethos" (Corbett 76–78).

The absent ghosts of the past in Casimir's "phoney fiction" (*Selected Plays* 278) have a counterpart in Father, relegated upstairs by an invaliding stroke. He never appears on stage, save very briefly at the end of act 2, when a second stroke causes his death. In his physical fragility, Father is not only a symbol of past authority, but also a catalyst for aging off and on stage. All his physical needs are attended to by the eldest daughter Judith, an "automaton of duty" (Higgins 49), and his privacy and intimacy are violated, as "the most intimate exchanges in which his soiled body is cleaned" are publicly exposed, "broadcast" by the baby alarm, a counterpart of Mrs. Wilson's handbell, acting as a loudspeaker (Roche 44) that Willie Diver, the factotum, sets up in the first scene in act 1. Such a mechanical trick is the vehicle to convey on stage the voice of the invisible Judge in his incontinent and dependent senility, making him present in his physical absence. "He is the voice of past authority, a voice without a body" (Corbett 75): amplified by the baby alarm the absent Father relegated offstage to the diegetic space takes possession of the mimetic space, invading it aurally in spite of no visible actions. In Friel's experimentation with absence, the baby alarm connects offstage to onstage, and the first sound coming from it is "the sound of static from the speaker," followed by "Father's laboured breathing," expanded into "incoherent mumbling" (256). The absent character has agency in both the diegetic and

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mimetic space as Friel manipulates spatial boundaries, thus Father's performing self makes him both present and absent at the same time, real and unreal—not unlike Mrs. Wilson—and his second childhood in the fragility of old age does not dispel his patriarchal control. In fact, Casimir "jumps to attention" when he hears his father's "clear and commanding voice" (282) through the baby alarm, regressing to childhood powerlessness and a state of terror before patriarchal authority. On hearing his name called by the voice of his absent father, Casimir's verbal reaction is a triple repetition: "God, it's eerie—that's what it is—eerie—eerie" (263). This touches the semantic areas of the no-man's land of the living dead, and from this limbo Judge O'Donnell returns time and again to interact and interfere with the action onstage imposing his oppressive authority *in absentia*.

The absent aged man performs the role he used to have, in his disorientation in time and space he addresses present people as if they were absent and behaves as if he were at court when his "very loud and very authoritative voice" (258) breaks into the stage space through the baby alarm: "Are you proposing that my time and the time of this court be squandered while the accused goes home and searches for this title which he claims he has in a tin-box somewhere? . . . Because I can tell you I won't have it—I will not have it! . . . And I will not endure it a second longer. Case dismissed. Court adjourned" (258). When he finally appears on stage only for a few seconds leaving the diegetic space to enter the mimetic space, he is a terrifying presence: the stage directions define him as "*a grotesque and frightening figure*" (304), who has nothing human left in him in his "*almost animal roar*" (304), announcing the end of an era. The damaging effects of patriarchal dominance, however, still remain with the family, for instance, in the immaturity of the "pivotal" character, Casimir.

In *The Loves of Cass McGuire* (1966), Friel deals with old age openly and directly, as the protagonist is the elderly returned emigrant Cass McGuire, and part of the play takes place in the setting of an old people's home sarcastically called Eden House. The play's stage directions are obsessively dominated by references to aging, prominence given to the characters' age and the assumed correspondence of their looks to their age, which each of them is expected to perform according to the socially constructed rules of behavior. Friel's second greatest success after *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, the play is concerned with emigration, home, and love, but its formal and experimental complexity highlights the play as a sociological, behavioral, and psychological study of old age and aging. In fact, it opens with an impressive image of old age, eighty-nine-year-old Gran McGuire, a matriarchal figure

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"*almost totally deaf,*" sitting in a wheelchair (11). Though appearing only at the beginning, Gran McGuire establishes the mood of the play and its concern with aging. Her senile dementia causes her to be present and absent on stage at the same time. Her presence is pervasive in act 1, yet everybody ignores her, she is virtually invisible and inaudible, by being old and useless, which anticipates her daughter Cass's position in the family. She is isolated by her deafness and senility, and her present immobility anticipates the disappointment and lack of perspectives the elderly returned emigrant Cass will experience after returning home. Rather than receiving the warm welcome Cass has been looking forward to for over fifty years, she becomes displaced in her own home (Corbett 2).

Cass worked in a depressed area of New York for fifty-two years (19), annihilating herself to earn the money she thought the family would need. However, the money Cass sent over the years in a tangible act of love and care had never been used and upon her return was a "nest-egg" waiting for her (41). "Nest-egg" is ironically ambiguous, as the nest of home refuses her any gesture of love. In this respect, Cass followed a certain kind of prescribed script all her life; she behaved as a decent Irish emigrant used to be expected to. The years of hardship in New York made her an old woman at seventy, a disagreeable character, vulgar, embittered, and aggressive. Her grotesque physicality marks the rupture with family and community, she now resists the "forces of normalizing performativity" (McMullan 142), and her unruly presence shatters the respectability of the family home: Cass does not act her age, rather her "performance falls outside behavioral norms" (Lipscomb, *Performing Age* 2) and is therefore socially unacceptable.

Invisible in the first part of act 1, Cass shouts, swears, smokes, and drinks off stage and when first entering the mimetic space she "charges" on the stage (14), which underlines her resistance and disruptive energy. Her banishment to Eden House is a form of imprisonment for Cass, where she identifies the place as the old workhouse it used to be in the past. The play's strategic Pirandellian metatextual organization highlights Cass's struggles with Harry over the power on her life and on her story (Coult 36): "The story begins where I say it begins, and I say it begins with me stuck in the gawddam workhouse! . . . What's this goddam play called? *The Loves of Cass McGuire*. Who's Cass McGuire? Me! Me! And they'll see what happens in the order I want them to see it" (15–16). If Cass tries to make herself heard as an elderly woman, she also dominates the mimetic space, as the stage space is fluid and transforms from Harry's respectable middle-class house to Eden House "at Cass's command" (Cave 134). In a similar way, Cass "refuses to be contained"

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in others' story and by social norms, which involves her enhanced presence and her role at large, as she embodies a form of "resistant performativity" (McMullan 142) in relation to the text she is part of. Her escape from the script of the play overlaps with escaping from the behavioral script that prescribes her role as an elderly woman expected to behave her age. She shouts "in her Irish-American voice" (14), she can be heard "singing at the top of her voice half the night" (12), and her verbal outburst when coming onstage is an attack to the "polite speech" (Kilroy 13) of Harry's household. Likewise, when at Eden House, Cass eludes the rules of the place by asking to have drink brought to her, yet her resistance to prescribed norms gradually deteriorates when she loses contact with the audience: at first they are "*her friends, her intimates*," while the other people on stage are "*interlopers*" (15). By the end of the play, seduced by the verbal fantasies of Trilbe and Ingram, two residents of Eden House, Cass loses contact with the world and the audience disappears: "And I could ov swore there were folks out there" (59). Presence and absence overlap as her contact with reality slowly disintegrates.

With *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Friel integrates age and aging into the dramaturgy of presence and absence, creating a connection between themes and staging techniques. Michael, the narrator, opens the play introducing a "*motionless . . . formal tableau*" (1) featuring all the characters involved in the play. According to the staging technique, Michael changes ages very rapidly by being himself in middle age recalling scenes of his childhood and his younger self, bodily absent on stage. The stage directions underline the relationship between adult Michael and Boy Michael in terms of presence and absence: "*The convention must now be established that the (imaginary) BOY MICHAEL is working at the kite materials lying on the ground. No dialogue with the BOY MICHAEL must ever be addressed directly to adult MICHAEL, the narrator*" (7). The "incorporeality of the child," to use Prapassaree Kramer's words (173), and his "physical elision" from the stage implicitly shed light on the aging body on stage (Lipscomb "Performing the Aging Self" 302), since Michael, introduced as "a young man" in the list of characters, is perceived by the audience as someone either in middle age or older. "The adult's aging body displays the passage of time," while the adult's presence and the child's absence "prevent the audience from slipping fully into the present action" (302). Aging as a process and as a condition pervades the whole play, and the stage directions accurately underline the age of each character. Father Jack, the elder brother recently returned from his missionary work in Africa, is fifty-three; the Mundy sisters' ages range between twenty-six and forty. None of them is thus actually old, yet health issues and economic difficulties have

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a significant impact on their aging. "Shrunken and jaundiced with malaria" (2), Jack is immediately perceived as old and the stage directions point out the contrast between his actual age and his appearance, while having forgotten his mother tongue adds to the confusion of senile dementia: "*He looks frail and older than his fifty-three years. . . . He walks—shuffles quickly—with his hands behind his back. He seems uneasy*, *confused*" (17). The verb "to shuffle" is repeatedly used in the stage directions to describe Jack's movements, it is the walk of an old man, and the subtext of confusion embedded in the verb anticipates the mental confusion of his senility. The twenty-five years spent in a leper colony in Uganda absorbed Jack and transformed him, a respected member of society into an "outcast" in disgrace gone "native" (39), who has abandoned his faith for African religion and rituals. His return to Ireland for unspecified reasons accelerates his decline, deriving from the clash between his imposed original culture and the behavioral freedom he experienced in Uganda.

Jack's confusion is reiterated, the expression "his mind is confused" (11, 12) is repeated in slightly different forms within a few lines and emphasized in his actions on stage, as he "doesn't know the difference" (12) between the sisters. Moreover, he has difficulty remembering words and speaks in fragmented sentences verbally reproducing his fragmented mind: "I expected to enter my bedroom through that . . . what I am missing—what I require . . . I had a handkerchief in my pocket and I think perhaps I—" (17).

Jack's aging and physical ailing have a counterpart in the sisters' awareness that the broken mirror in the house shows only "more and more wrinkles" (3). A sense of impending old age, of life having been wasted, obsesses the Mundy household as the sisters gradually become aware "that they are no longer considered marriageable because of their age" (Boltwood 170). The topography of the house, "two miles outside the village of Ballybeg" (n.pag.), neither inside nor outside the village community, marks the sisters as outcasts or outsiders, and being unmarried they do not conform to the status required of women in 1936 Ireland. This makes them socially invisible, and so does the fact that Chris, the youngest sister, has mothered an illegitimate child, Michael, whose adult self as the narrator displays awareness of having had a role in the family's becoming "ostracized for its transgression" (Boltwood 170). Because of Chris's having broken the rules, the unconventional family of the Mundy sisters raising a child without a father does not conform to the prescribed and accepted behavioral norms rooted in the postcolonial social milieu of control and repression.

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Kate, the eldest of the sisters, acts as the authority in the family, and as a school teacher she reproduces at home the regulatory and normative social and cultural control characterizing her job, reminding her sisters of the behavior expected of them at their age and in their position, of the social script they are expected to follow. Her reaction to Agnes's suggestion to go to the harvest dance of the festival of Lughnasa is haunted by a rigid insistence on respectability: "We're going nowhere! . . . Just look at yourselves! Dancing at our time of day? . . . Do you want the whole countryside to be laughing at us?—women of our years?—mature women, dancing?" (13).

However, the sisters, even Kate, manage to momentarily elude the social script while making their wild dance in act 1, which is not only a powerful element of dramaturgy but also an unspoken act of subversion. Their dance is a wordless response to impending aging and social invisibility, a form of resistance and liberation from "confining gender roles" and from the "normalising performativity" (McMullan 142) of village life in Ireland in the 1930s, a form of escape by means of the unruly body, a statement of youth and survival, a challenge to ideological and social discursive constructions. From this point of view, considering age as socially and culturally constructed (Lipscomb, Marshall "Introduction" 5), the unruly dance is a denial of the imposed sense of impending aging. The lack of control embedded in the dance is highlighted in the stage directions: Maggie has "*a look of defiance, of aggression*," her face is a *"crude mask of happiness*," she metamorphoses into "*a white-faced, frantic dervish*" (21). In spite of this brief interlude, the subtext of aging haunts the play and overlaps with the perception of "things changing too quickly" (2) in the Mundy house and in the social context of Ballybeg, but certainly not for the better with regard to the sisters.

In the same way as in society the elderly become invisible, Friel plays with the explicit and implicit absence of aging and aged characters onstage caught up in different phases of physical and mental decline and the consciousness of aging. Old age and aging are still fairly new approaches in literary and drama studies, but "[t]heatre can show us different perspectives on age" (Lipscomb, *Performing Age* 154), being a catalyst that certainly has value in Friel's plays. The plays taken into account point out age and aging as a *fil rouge* throughout his dramatic work, underlying the subtext of several of his plays as pivotal features since the early stages through further developments in his career, thus displaying a recurrent interest in the topic. Friel exploits the interaction of presence and absence off and on stage as an

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aspect of his stagecraft, responding to the various conditions of old age. If in some plays elderly characters remain in the background, in others issues of age and aging gain ground and become pivotal to dramatic construction, and what Heather Ingman calls "gerontological lens" (1) can provide new insights in the study of Friel's dramatic production. His exploration of age, aging, and the elderly either as dominating characters or on the periphery of the social context shows his treatment of this *leitmotif* as a recurring tendency to shed light on the culturally and discursively inflected complexity of aging identities throughout his career.

Independent Scholar
Milan, Italy

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