

LUGHNASA

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phrase “faoi do cois.”

“It’s a wonderful phrase; it means ‘under the feet,’” Ms. Morgan says. “When music is so a part of you, it’s not in your head, it’s not in your heart, it’s under your feet.”

Learning this traditional style of Irish dancing was challenging, akin to learning a whole new language, she says. But it’s a basic, essential part of their characters.

“It’s a really interesting layer, dances that these people would’ve done basically from the time they were old enough to walk: ‘I know it, I don’t have to think about it.’ They just know this.”

“It isn’t called pouting or pining in Lughnasa, it’s dancing,” points out actor Jan Wikstrom, who just debuted at the Florida Rep’s production of “Indian Blood.” “There are several different kinds of dancing in the play. It’s almost a picture of a person having to break through into some new kind of new kind of communication. Words fail, but we have to dance. We have no choice but to dance to express what we must express.

“It happens in several relationships with all the characters in several different ways. Inside all of us is this seething need to express — and the play uses this word — ‘otherness,’ to express that otherness. It’s a great Irish play, and like all great plays, it’s universal. It’s about this need in all of our hearts to dance.”

“Dancing at Lughnasa” is a memory play; a specific time during a certain summer, as remembered by a man who was just seven at the time. Ms. Morgan and Ms. Wikstrom’s sisters are played by Rachel Burttram, Carrie Lund and Michele Damato. Chris Clavelli, Brendan Powers and Peter Thomasson round out the cast.

They’re thrilled to be performing in a Brian Friel play, and, for many of them, to be working once again with guest director Maureen Heffernan.

“I love Brian Friel; I love the way he writes,” declares Ms. Morgan, who’s acted in some of his other works. “This play is beautifully written but has an ache to it. It’s not that it’s sad, but the whole play just aches. The mixture of those two, I think, is a very British thing, the mixture of that terrible longing and humor in the face of it. The stiff upper lip. This play has it by the bucketload. These women are fighting, not to stay alive, but to be alive.”

Ms. Morgan first worked with Ms. Heffernan at Florida Rep last year during “Doubt.”

“And I said I would work with her again in a heartbeat,” she says. “I would work with her on anything, I don’t care. She is very respectful. She doesn’t ever crush what you think, what you bring to the table, and she doesn’t impose a vision on the process. It’s a collaborative art. That’s what theater is, people sitting in a room, all bringing stuff to the table. That’s the joy, that’s why you hire actors who can bring something, so you can use what they bring to the table.”

Working with Ms. Heffernan is a very freeing process, Ms. Morgan says, because she allows her actors to risk and experiment and be creative.

“She’s bright and insightful and she just knows a lot. And I trust her.”

Ms. Wikstrom, who met the director 29 years ago when both were working for a regional theater in New Brunswick, NJ, echoes the sentiment.

“She is arguably the most nurturing director I’ve ever worked with,” she says. “She understands this process of acting. She doesn’t jump over the fence and act for you, but respects what you need, and makes sure you get it from her, without ever losing anything she needs for the bigger picture. She’s very nurturing.”



Lisa Morgan(standing) and Jan Wikstrom rehearse a scene from Dancing at Lughnasa at the Florida Rep.

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Director Maureen Heffernan

The rehearsal process is very organic, Ms. Wikstrom says.

“I really feel heard in rehearsal. There’s a negotiation among the entire company; we’ll take an idea and see if it works.”

Rehearsals for other plays in other companies aren’t always so positive an experience.

“The ideal isn’t always realized,” Ms. Wikstrom agrees. “We’ve all got our stories of somebody’s ego — hopefully not ours — getting in the way of the work. But there’s a generosity about Maureen that allows everybody to collaborate. Then, of course, she does supply that structure: the buck stops here. One of my favorite things in rehearsal is when she says ‘No, no, no.’ Within the boundaries, we flourish.”

Ms. Heffernan initially trained as an actor.

“I was lucky enough to work with great acting teachers, and then had the opportunity, in grad school, to be an acting teacher myself,” she says. “And I was always so fascinated by the things that people would say. Having read a play, I’d have lots of ideas about what was going on, what it was about. But often the actors I worked with would have another insight into that play that I didn’t have, something that would make me say, ‘Oh, I never thought of it that way.’

“That’s what I think is so interesting about being in human company, that we get different ideas about how things should look or sound, or what’s happen-

ing. So one of the reasons I wanted to become a director is that I love the idea of reading a play and reading a story and thinking what that should look or sound like. But when I direct, I’ve always had that opportunity to see how much other people bring to it.”

She looks at a play from an overarching, broad point of view, while the actors approach it from the viewpoint of their character, she says.

“That’s what’s so interesting about acting, is that it allows us to bring all of the experiences we had, all of the experiences we’ve dreamed about,” Ms. Heffernan says. “One of the lines they always tell you in acting class is: In an acting class, you can kill your mother without having to commit a crime, or leave your husband, or cheat on your partner. Any of those things; you’re allowed the full experience.”

“All of us have pieces of that within us, all of us have that broad range of human emotion.”

Taking into account her actors’ thoughts and ideas doesn’t make the play “a totally different thing. It becomes a fuller thing,” she says.

Ms. Heffernan, who’s of Irish descent, uses the example of a snapshot of her father’s family who came from Ireland in the 1930s. Looking at it, she had a certain idea and feelings about the people in the photo. Then, she says, an aunt told her a story about her grandfather and his sister, and she had a broader picture.

The more relatives who talked to her about the picture, the deeper her understanding of the people in it grew.

“It’s almost like when you see that photograph at the top of a movie that then comes to life, that black and white photo that becomes a color photo that then moves into a living thing,” she says.

“That’s what I think happens with a play. There are things that are on the page, there are things that you read and you begin to imagine in your head, and then you hear those words said by living people. And with the talent and skill of these actors, they become more dimensional, and you go, ‘Ahhh, of course! It’s not just this, it’s this and this!’”

She recognizes that not all directors

work this way; some have very specific visions of what they want a play to be, and aren’t as collaborative.

“People approach this differently, and for different reasons,” she says. “I had a friend who worked with a very famous director in New York, who she very much admired. I said, ‘What was it like working with her?’ And she said, ‘Working with her, I realized how much I appreciated her as an audience!’”

“She said, ‘She didn’t need me; she could’ve used a puppet.’ And she said, ‘I’m a great admirer of her work, a great admirer. I really want to see it; I don’t want to be in it.’”

Ms. Heffernan has long loved “Dancing at Lughnasa.” She was supposed to put on a production 10 years ago, but it fell through.

“It’s a play I’ve known about for a long time and really care about,” she says.

She even had the opportunity to see it in London.

“I was very taken by it,” she says.

“What’s interesting is that this is a memory play, and memories come back to you in pieces. And so does this play come back to you in pieces. So it’s a really interesting one to put together like a puzzle: oh, they say this here and they say this down there, so when did this happen? Or, they talk about this-and-this coming.”

“This play comes to us by what a child saw and heard. And then we put the pieces together. And then afterward, he sort of tells us what happened.”

The dancing, she says, are the dreams that aren’t expressed in words, a place for them to release the frustrations, excitement and sensuality the characters aren’t allowed to release in their ordinary day-to-day lives.

“So the dancing is very significant,” Ms. Heffernan says. “I think the dancing connects them to ancient times, who these people were, these Celts. It gives you many insights into them.”

In musical theater, there’s a saying that actors sing when words can no longer express their feelings, she says.

“I think in this play, that people dance when words can no longer express everything they feel.” ■