

Toronto Free Theatre

# Something powerful is lost in Irish translation

W. Hurst  
Toronto Free Theatre's production of *Translations* tries to dramatize Irish history. However, this uneven play by Brian Friel never matches the impact of the historical reality.

In the early 19th century, the English perpetrated two acts intended to further damage Irish culture. First, the National School System was instituted, which effectively replaced Gaelic with English as the common tongue of the native people. Second, the military arrived in Ireland to, ostensibly, map out the countryside. During the map-making, Gaelic names were replaced

by English names. Little attempt was made to approximate the historical or cultural meaning the place names once had.

*Translations* is set in a 'hedge school' where people could illicitly study history, maths and other subjects in their native Gaelic. The time is the 1830's and the military has just arrived to start mapping out the country and announce the National School. The Irish characters are established before the introduction of the English officers. However, Friel forces these characters to react to the coming tragedy without any emotional logic.

Maire, a pragmatic woman, is willing to ship off to America rather than marry the penniless man she loves. By emigrating, she can send money home to support a household still full of young children but no provider. Maire wants to learn English because it would be practical. With no apparent motivation, she falls passionately in love with an English military cartographer who cannot speak Gaelic. She cannot speak English. Mary Haney supplies Maire's intensity but without help from the script, she cannot make sense of her character's involvement with the enemy.

Another pivotal character, Owen, aids the military by re-naming the Gaelic locations and translating English orders. Until the very end of the play, Owen is untroubled by his actions. He sees himself as an expediter, not a traitor, to his culture. Miles Potter is charming and blase as Owen, until he explodes into political ferocity and awareness. The playwright seems to suggest that Owen changes because of an innate sense of cultural history. Politics of the blood?

Curiously, the one character who does not hold centre stage is, finally, the most memorable and the most

potent. Sarah, as played by Kate Trotter, is a voluntarily mute farm girl. She struggles to speak her language only to have it outlawed. Rather than submit herself to abuse, Sarah holds the Gaelic tongue within, for her own pleasure and reward. Trotter, onstage constantly, never lets her character slip away, although she has few lines and little attention paid to her by the cast or the script.

The hedge school set is visually evocative, but the cast never seems to relate to it, except as a set, because playwright Friel has written figures, not people.

*Translations* reduces tragedy and brutality to melodrama, which may appeal to audiences sympathetic to the Irish dilemma. However, the decimation of cultural heritage is not confined to the British Isles. Without fanfare or blatant force, Canada's federal government deals with its native people in much the same way.

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ORIENTATION SESSION: Wednesday, February 2. 9:00-10:00 a.m. Room S 105, Ross Building  
INTERVIEWS: Wednesday, February 2. 10:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. Room N108, Ross Building.

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**Actors in urban jungle**  
Barb Taylor  
*In the Jungle of Cities* by Bertolt Brecht, performed by the 1982 Theatre Company, has just finished its Harbourfront run.  
Set in Chicago, 1912, the play featured two desperate men fighting each other and the city, in seedy bars and on the street. Their battle climaxes with a sinuous wrestling match, which almost becomes a lovers battle between the two men.  
The 1982 Theatre Company succeeds in emphasizing the social interactions which evolve from the downtrodden city. Women are raped and used, pushed into prostitution. The city is not at all pretty, when these events are prominent.  
Although the time periods are similar, the difference between *In the Jungles of Cities* and *The Silver Veil*, another Theatre Company effort, is startling. In *The Silver Veil*, the hope and the inspiration of social revolution overcomes the poverty of the Latvian characters. In *In the Jungle of Cities*, Chicago people are impoverished and without hope. When they turn on each other, they degenerate. In both plays, the Theatre Company conveys the feelings of the time, while incorporating many innovative theatrical techniques.  
The 1982 Theatre Company is a young troupe from London, England who emphasize a feminist and collective ideology in their work. *The Silver Veil* will return to the Theatre Centre, January 11 to 16, in response to the acclaim this company has received.


**And Atkinson rhythm and rhyme**  
Atkinson College Students Association presents a unique evening of poetry, jazz, dub, and reggae this Monday night in the Crowe's Nest. Several poet / writers will be on hand to read and perform their work. Devon Haughton will recite dub poetry set to reggae rhythms. Also present will be former York Student Clifton Joseph (author of Metropolitan Blues), Lillian Allen, Dionne Brand and Krisantha Sri Bhaggiyadatta. It all starts at 7:30 and is licensed under LLBO.  
140 Atkinson College.

**Bethune Jazz Series**  
The Bethune Jazz Series of free Wednesday afternoon jazz concerts continues this week with the music of pianist Mark Eisenman. Eisenman, a graduate of the York Music Department, is also an instructor in the Jazz programme.  
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Mary Haney as Maire

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