

## Candidate 8 evidence

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How do today's theatre practitioners utilise and give significance to language?

'Theatre' – the word dates back to ancient Grecian times, deriving from the Greek 'theatron' – loosely translating to 'the seeing place'. Certainly, it is true that theatre is nothing if not a spectacle; a place where people can go to watch stories unfold before their eyes. However, there is an equally important but often overlooked element to theatre: language. What's more is that it has become increasingly overlooked as a result of the continual progression in regards to the visual aspects of theatre. It has been eclipsed by societal advances in technology and design, which have allowed for the creation of admittedly stunning sets and costume. At face value, this progression has been undoubtedly beneficial – providing practitioners with access to an increasingly varied range of tools with which they can display their creative vision. However, the consequence of the immense technical potential of modern theatre is that, within all of its elaborate splendour, language is often lost. Language lies at the core of every story, it is the essence and soul of communication and is, ultimately, the fundamental means by which we express. Therefore, its importance in theatre is irrefutable and it cannot be neglected or devalued without detriment to a performance. To evidence this, I will be analysing the National Theatre's 2018 production of Brian Friel's *Translations* – a production all about language in regards to its themes and its presentation – in supplement with the National Theatre's 2021 adaptation of Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood*, a thorough and breathtakingly immersive exploration of words, their importance, and the vastness of their impact. Both are productions in which the practitioner makes a detectable effort to prioritise language in their storytelling and give significance to words in relation to the production as a whole.

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Brian Friel's *Translations* is one of the most critically acclaimed plays of our time. The Lyric Theatre even described the play as a "modern masterpiece"<sup>1</sup> and director Ian Rickson clearly focused his intentions on paying homage to the legendary Irish playwright's original artistic vision when directing the National Theatre's 2018 production of the play. In a 2018 interview, Rickson had this to say in regards to his preparatory process "I sort of do the same thing whether it's Sophocles, McPherson or Friel. Which is try and travel as deep as I can into their shadow, into their unconscious, into their intentions... My job is to create a culture in rehearsal where language is thrumming with charged energy and meaning."<sup>2</sup> Even in the limited interviews that are available discussing Rickson's adaptation of the play, it is unmistakably clear from his thoughtful and deferential comments, that his intentions were, above all else, to preserve and reiterate the original messages of the play. Modern revivals and contemporary adaptations are at their best when the intentions of the original are at the forefront of the practitioner's mind and are valued above any desire to improve upon or alter the play which they are adapting. It is clearly apparent that Rickson is aware of this as a current practitioner, evidenced – if not from the wonderfully provocative and captivating execution of his production of *Translations* – by further comments he made during the same interview, stating "If you revive a play like *Translations* the endeavour had to be to enshrine it as a modern classic."<sup>3</sup>

Set during 19<sup>th</sup> century Ireland in the fictional town of Balie Beag, the play tells the story of a small town beginning to suffer the effects of British colonialism. Most of the story takes place in a hedge school, in which the locals of the town would be educated in their native tongue in exchange for turf or butter. The school's headmaster, Hugh (Ciarán Hinds) is an

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<sup>1</sup> The Lyric Theatre, available at: <https://lyrictheatre.co.uk/whats-on/translations>

<sup>2</sup> Ian Rickson in interview with Jasper Rees of The Arts Desk, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2018, available at: <https://theartsdesk.com/node/81414/view>

<sup>3</sup> Ian Rickson in interview with Jasper Rees of The Arts Desk, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2018, available at: <https://theartsdesk.com/node/81414/view>

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astute, linguistically well-versed man who refuses, much to the chagrin of some of his students, to teach any English. It is not for any lack of ability, but a choice he makes out of a desire for preservation and an attempt to take an opposing stance against the seemingly imminent anglicisation of the entire country. These ideas carry through vividly in Hinds' performance as he portrays a loud, prideful and indignant man, whose authority and intelligence are conveyed primarily by Hinds' vocal performance. It is the fantastic range of volume and variation in tone explored by many of the actors in the production that reinforces the plays entire premise: that language and words have immense power and significance far beyond communication.

The beauty of the play is that it is clearly suggestive of very political issues like colonisation, yet still it remains a strictly non-political play. Friel himself said "the play has to do and only to do with language and if it becomes overwhelmed by the political element, the play is lost."<sup>4</sup> Rickson seems to truly appreciate this about Friel's original play, stating "It's beautifully provocative; it's not sectarian or preachy."<sup>5</sup> and it is absolutely true that the best way to convey a message to an audience is not to create a display of political propaganda, but simply to tell a story grounded in truth and allow the audience to take from it what they will. That is exactly what this production does so brilliantly: it is unfalteringly effective in its storytelling. The set, bland and minimalistic as it is, allows you to focus on the strong and captivating vocal performances of the entire cast. Even sound and lighting are integrated only to a fairly minimalistic degree. The narrative is driven by the storytelling and, thus, the plays key themes and messages regarding language are conveyed even through its mode of presentation. The actors really do tell the story rather than show it; their emotions are conveyed through their tone more so than their physicality and each individual actor does an

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<sup>4</sup> Brian Friel, 'Extracts from a Sporadic Diary', (London, 1986), 58

<sup>5</sup> Ian Rickson in interview with Jasper Rees of The Arts Desk, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2018, available at: <https://theartsdesk.com/node/81414/view>

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excellent job of building character through unique interpretations of the dialogue – in terms of differing variables such as pacing, intonation, and volume.

The conflict in the plot arises when the second of Hugh's sons, Owen, arrives back from Dublin with two English soldiers. Owen (Fra Fee) as a character is, really, a foil to his brother Manus (Seamus O'Hara). Owen's eagerness for change and resultant willingness to accept the effects of colonisation directly contrasts the preservatory stance taken by all the others in the town – most notably his brother. Upon his arrival, Owen is, at first, joyously welcomed by all until there is a sudden shift in the atmosphere on stage when he informs them – rather sheepishly and with a definitively begrudging tone – that he is on the pay roll of the English army, working for them as a translator. As he exits, he proceeds to shout disapprovingly at the rest of the characters, declaring his confusion as to why they continue to speak in their “quaint archaic tongue”<sup>6</sup> rather than “the King's good English”<sup>7</sup>. In response to these remarks, there is a detectable deflation in mood on the stage, conveyed excellently by the slumped and uncertain stance adopted by many of the characters, alongside everyone's unmistakably upset and confused facial expressions. Shortly after this, in a brilliantly comedic scene during which Owen has to translate for the soldiers, Captain Lancey declares that their purpose for being in Baile Beag is to rewrite its map, translating and anglicising all the names. This, of course, strikes up tension between Owen and his brother throughout the rest of the play. The fact that this news is delivered in such a disconnected and ingenuous way as through translation makes it all the more meaningful and impactful to watch on stage. What makes this scene all the more memorable is that it is the first time the genius conceit of Friel's play (that the character's are in theory conversing in Irish but the actors are, in actuality, speaking English) results in some degree of dramatic irony; the audience is put in

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<sup>6</sup> Brian Friel, *Translations*. London: Faber, 1981. Print.

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the position of being able to understand both sides, much as a translator would. So, in moments such as this, the audience is obliged to pay even closer attention to the dialogue and so the play's big conceit in its entirety is, really, yet another method through which language is prioritised in the storytelling. It forces the audience to pay closer attention to the words being spoken on stage, who is speaking them, and why. Moreover, the fact that Friel, an Irish playwright, is writing his play about Ireland with Irish characters conversing in English dressed up as Irish is, in itself, a reflection of the exact themes of stolen culture with which the play deals.

Comparatively, Lyndsey Turner's 2021 production of Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood* is another contemporary adaptation which does an equally wonderful job of prioritising language and words in its presentation of a story. Thomas' original *Under Milk Wood* was a radio play so the play itself is one in which language is at the forefront. Turner does fantastically well to preserve the importance of language in her production through what is, truly, a thorough and captivating exploration of all the different forms of verbal expression. The production conveys wonderful symbolism and captivating storytelling through means of both naturalistic and non-naturalistic dialogue, as well as through poetry, song, and monologue.

The play begins in naturalistic, typical contemporary-style dialogue, with Owain Jenkins (Michael Sheen), storming hurriedly and urgently into a care home and adamantly demanding to speak to his father, Mr Jenkins (Karl Johnson). It is at this point that it is established that Mr Jenkins, due to his dementia, is completely unresponsive and seemingly unable to comprehend much of what is going on around him, which Karl Johnson portrays excellently in his use of a confused and slightly scared facial expression, while remaining seated so as to

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be both physically and vocally unresponsive and simply not present. However, the staff inform Owain that his father's memory was, not so long ago, temporarily restored to some degree when he was presented with a collection of nostalgic photos from his past. As the play goes on to demonstrate extensively, we can, to some degree, revive the past through stories and through reminiscing. So, this clear solution to Owain's need to talk to his uncommunicative will serve as the justification and foundation for the play's clear-cut central concern – storytelling. In essence, this narrative conflict and its obvious solution (storytelling) grounds the entirety of the play's linguistic exploration in a place of logic; it makes sense within the context of the plot that Owain would venture on such a beautiful linguistic exploration and so nothing in the production ever feels out of place. The production as a whole contains some of the most descriptive monologues and poetry in modern-day theatre. In a review of the play, the guardian called it a "tour de force of oral poetry which oozes word pictures and onomatopoeic musicality."<sup>8</sup> And this style of performance really does work, tremendously efficiently, at every moment, to paint a vivid picture for the audience. It is through this creatively varied persuasive approach that language, description, and storytelling are provided with such an overwhelming sense of importance throughout the production.

Possibly the most unique element of the play is its integration of poetry. Dylan Thomas himself once said of poetry that "A good poem is a contribution to reality. The world is never the same once a good poem has been added to it."<sup>9</sup> So, of course, when it is integrated appropriately and treated with such respect – as is certainly the case in 'Under Milk Wood' – poetry can bring a beautifully stylistic touch to a stage production. The most interesting usage

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<sup>8</sup> Arifa Akbar, The Guardian. 24 June, 2021. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/jun/24/under-milk-wood-review-michael-sheen-dylan-thomas-national-theatre#:~:text=it%20is%20hard%20to%20go,of%20intimately%20lived%20village%20life.>

<sup>9</sup> Dylan Thomas in discussion with Roy Campbell. 'Books and Writers'. 4 June, 1946

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of poetry in this production was when it was used to provide gorgeously vivid descriptions of the set – often whilst, or even before, the set has been brought on stage. The most memorable of such moments was one which took place near the end of the play. Mr Jenkin's is sat stage right as Owain, centre stage, describes a scene of fisherman simply sitting and watching the sea. There is no attempt made whatsoever to visually depict this scene through set or character and yet the audience still receives such a beautifully clear picture. The rich and descriptive poetry is performed with such an entrancingly musical tone and with such calculated and captivating rhythm by Michael Sheen, that it is enough on its own to provide a crystal-clear image. This is only one of the many creative decisions made by Turner in this production which allows language to play a crucially integral role in the creation of the production in its entirety rather than just as dialogue alone.

Another of such creative decisions, was the frequented usage of narrated action. This was one of the more regularly utilised creative concepts which really put language at the forefront of this production. The storytelling, usually from Owain, would very regularly coincide with or preface the action taking place on stage; as Owain would perform poetic speeches or descriptive monologues, the characters – portrayed by the same actors playing the elderly care home residents – would take their positions on stage and begin physically acting out the scene being described on stage. The most fascinating thing about this use of narration was that it seemed, in some way, to command the action itself. The narrated action had a very interesting internal effect on the performance as it, of course, provided the actors with something of an emotional simulant. Thus, the audience was presented with a more genuine and authentic performance. However, alongside this, the audience would also be receiving the verbal description from the narration and so were, themselves, provided with an emotional stimulant of sorts – in addition to the physical performance of the actors. So, not only did the narrated action make for a unique and atypical style of performance, but also a

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harmonious blend of physicality and verbal description, the result of which was a genuinely powerful style of performance with a heightened impact on the audience – particularly, I would say, because the description remained so rich and vivid. Moreover, this performance style also conveyed a thematic importance to the integration of language and spoken words throughout the story. The narrated action, on a more conceptual basis, established the idea that words have the capability to construct and recreate life. These scenes remind the audience – by presenting us with a physical depiction of an imaginative construction – of the unlimited power that imagination holds; how we preserve memories through stories and keep those stories alive by telling and retelling them. These narrated scenes convey the idea that words have the wonderful ability of construction; we can paint such astonishingly clear pictures with only verbal description and it is demonstrated to be true in every minute of this production.

Another method through which language was given importance on a thematic basis was the idea of characters needing, not just to tell a story, but to be heard while doing so. The play establishes that there is, indeed, a discernible difference between the need to speak and the need to be heard. This difference is made visually apparent to the audience from the beginning of the play. Before we become immersed in Owain's storytelling, there is a highly impactful moment which takes place in the care home. Owain desperately attempts to communicate with his father, breaking the quiet stillness of the care home as he cries, desperately "Please Dad, I need you to listen to me."<sup>10</sup> After this, Owain accepts that his father is currently unresponsive and abandons his need to be heard. We see this come across in the story as his character motivation shifts from speaking for the sake of being heard, to

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<sup>10</sup> Siân Owen, *Under Milk Wood* (National theatre adaptation). Ran from 16 June – 24 July, 2021

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speaking in attempts to provoke thought and memory. This shift is also presented, once again through language, as his manner of speaking shifts from naturalistic dialogue to a declamatory monologue. Though, as Owain continues, we begin to witness the effects of speaking without being heard. His elaborately descriptive monologues and poetry begin to transform into what is, for Owain, a cathartic and therapeutic escape from reality. Actor Michael Sheen portrays this wonderfully as his delivery becomes increasingly theatrical and self-absorbed, luxuriating on his words and, a lot of the time, not even looking at his father – the person to whom he is supposed to be speaking. Then, once again, the audience is presented with a starkly contrasting shift in Owain's manner of speaking once his father begins to understand him at the very end of the production. His words, while still eloquent and highly descriptive, at this point, carry with them a newfound sense of palpable emotion and intent. It is this detectable shifting in his character's intent behind his words that provides yet another element of conceptual significance to the idea of language in the form of storytelling within this production.

Both of these contemporary productions provide an excellent demonstrative answer to the question of how, in an ever-evolving and increasingly visual modern theatres scene, do we keep the magic of spoken word alive? It is modern adaptations like Rickson's *Translations* and Turner's *Under milkwood*, which demonstrate – through their narratives and through their strikingly vocal and verbally prominent presentation – the indisputable importance of language in theatre as well as how deeply it is connected to culture and to humanity.

Languages, unique as they all are, celebrate our diversity, they proudly display our heritages; to write in them is to preserve them, to speak them is to rejoice in their magnificence.

Language is our most authentic and human connection to those who lived and spoke before us. As Hugh says in *Translations* "It is not the literal past, the 'facts' of history, that shape us,

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but images of the past embodied in language.”<sup>11</sup> Words themselves instil their very essence in everything they create, shaping and defining so much of our existence. Theatre is built on a foundation of words; it is – and always has been – an art form in which we never stop discovering all the different ways to express them. Naturally, theatre will – and should – continue to evolve and reshape itself but it is essential, from an understanding point of why theatre itself exists, that practitioners never forget the importance of language in theatre. There is no script without words, there is no creative process without discussion, there is no theatre without language.

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<sup>11</sup> Brian Friel, *Translations*. London: Faber, 1981. Print.

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