

George Woollands and Margaret Rendle founded Proscenium in 1924. The company's first production was the now little-known *The Tide* by Basil McDonald Hastings. Since then, the company has performed nearly 250 plays, using Harrow as a base since 1945. In this time Proscenium has built up a strong reputation for performing challenging plays (both classic and contemporary) to a high standard.

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# PROSCENIUM

Molly Sweeney

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**By Brian Friel**

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25<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> January 2006  
Travellers Studio, Hatch End

## Molly Sweeney

by  
Brian Friel

Molly	Angie Sutherland
Frank	Duncan Sykes
Mr Rice	David Pearson
Directed by	Crystal Anthony
Stage Manager	Colin Hickman
Lighting/Sound	Arts Culture Harrow

With thanks to Janet Harrison

There will be an interval of 15 minutes between Act 1 and Act 2

### Music

<i>Oft in the Stilly Night</i>	Singer: John McCormack
	Accompanist: Gerald Moore.
<i>The Lament for Limerick</i>	written after the breaking of the Treaty of Limerick in 1691

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Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –  
Success in Circuit lies  
Too bright for our infirm Delight  
The Truth's superb surprise  
As Lightning to the Children eased  
With explanation kind  
The Truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind –

*Emily Dickinson*

Learning to see is not like learning a new language. It's like learning language for the first time.

*Denis Diderot*

### The Playwright

Born in Omagh, Co. Tyrone in 1929, Brian Friel and his family moved to Derry City in 1939. He started to write in the 1950s, first short stories and then experimenting with drama. He recalled some twenty years later the impulse *to survey and analyse the mixed holding I had inherited: the personal, traditional and acquired knowledge that cocooned me, an Irish Catholic teacher with a nationalist background, living in a schizophrenic community, son of a teacher, grandson of peasants who could neither read or write.* Most of his plays invoke or centre upon his fictional Donegal world of 'Ballybeg', but all show an awareness of the wider world outside. In 1980 he was co-founder, with a number of other Northern Irish artists and intellectuals, of the Field Day Company and that seemed to place him firmly in the tradition of political playwright. However, his most overtly political plays, such as *Translations*, raise more questions than they answer and are characterised by ambiguity not certainty, and his most personal plays, such as *Molly Sweeney*, have the resonance of political metaphor.

Roy Foster, in an article in June 2005, writes: *In plays of extraordinary subtlety, complexity and force he has interpreted a divided culture to itself, in a body of work that has already placed him on a level with Synge and O'Casey.* And Peter Brooke said that *of all contemporary authors, there is no one I admire more highly than Brian Friel.* His impressive body of dramatic work includes:

- 1964 *Philadelphia, Here I Come*, Gaiety Theatre, Dublin
- 1968 *Crystal and the Fox*, Gaiety, Dublin
- 1971 *The Gentle Island*, Olympia, Dublin
- 1973 *The Freedom of the City*, Royal Court Theatre, London
- 1975 *Volunteers*, Abbey, Dublin
- 1979 *Aristocrats*, Abbey, Dublin
- 1979 *Faith Healer*, Longacre Theatre, New York
- 1980 *Translations*, Derry
- 1982 *The Communication Cord*, Derry
- 1988 *Making History*, Derry
- 1990 *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Abbey, Dublin
- 1993 *Wonderful Tennessee*, Abbey, Dublin
- 1994 *Molly Sweeney*, Gate, Dublin
- 1997 *Give Me Your Answer, Do!*, Abbey, Dublin
- 2001 *The Yalta Game*, Gate, Dublin
- 2002 *Afterplay*, Gate, Dublin
- 2003 *Performances*, Gate, Dublin
- 2005 *The Home Place*, Gate, Dublin

## To See and Not See

Brian Friel acknowledges great indebtedness to Oliver Sacks' essay *To See and Not See* in *An Anthropologist on Mars*. Sacks gives an account of the experience of a fifty year old man, Virgil, virtually blind since early childhood and encouraged by his fiancée to consult the ophthalmologist, Dr Hamlin. Dr Hamlin thought that as Virgil could distinguish light and dark and the shadow of a hand moving in front of his eyes the retina was not totally destroyed:

“And cataract extraction was a relatively simple procedure, done under local anaesthetic, with very little surgical risk. There was nothing to lose .. and there might be much to gain. Amy and Virgil would be getting married soon .. wouldn't it be fantastic if he could see? If, after a near lifetime of near blindness his first vision could be his bride, the wedding, the minister, the church! Dr Hamlin had agreed to operate and the cataract on Virgil's right eye had been removed a fortnight earlier, Amy's father informed me. And, miraculously, the operation had worked. Amy, who began keeping a journal the day after the operation .. the day the bandages were removed .. wrote her initial entry:

*Virgil can SEE! ..Entire office in tears, first time Virgil has sight for forty years .. Virgil's family so excited, crying, can't believe it! .. Miracle of sight restored incredible!*

But the following day she remarked problems:

*Trying to adjust to being sighted, tough to go from blindness to sighted. Has to think faster, not able to trust vision yet .. Like baby just learning to see, everything new, exciting, scary, unsure of what seeing means.*

Virgil told me later that in this first moment he had no idea what he was seeing. There was light, there was movement, there was colour, all mixed up, all meaningless, a blur. Then out of the blur came a voice that said, “Well?” Then, and only then, he said, did he finally realise that this chaos of light and shadow was a face .. and, indeed, the face of his surgeon.

The rest of us, born sighted, can scarcely imagine such confusion. We make our world through incessant experience, categorisation, memory, reconnection. But when Virgil opened his eyes .. there were no visual memories to support a perception; there was no world of experience and meaning awaiting him. He saw, but what he saw had no coherence. His retina and optic nerve were active,

transmitting impulses, but his brain could make no sense of them; he was, as neurologists say, agnostic.

For Virgil, with half a century of forgetting whatever visual engrams he had constructed, the learning, or relearning, of these transforms required hours of conscious and systematic exploration each day. This first month saw a systematic exploration, by sight and touch, of all the smallest things in the house: fruit, vegetables, bottles, cans, cutlery, flowers, the knickknacks on the mantelpiece .. turning them round and round, holding them close to him, then at arm's length, trying to synthesize their varying appearances into a sense of unitary objecthood. Brain systems of all animals may respond to overwhelming stimulation, or stimulation past a critical point, with a sudden shutdown. Such reactions have nothing to do with the individual or his motives. They are purely local and physiological and can occur even in isolated slices of cerebral cortex: they are a biological defence against neural overload.”

## The Experience of Blindness.

In *The Mind's Eye, a Neurologist's Notebook* Oliver Sacks refers to the work of Jacques Lusseyron, a French Resistance fighter, who went blind at the age of eight. In his memoirs, *And There Was Light*, Lusseyron writes:

*A blind person has a better sense of feeling, of taste, of touch...[these are] the gifts of the blind.*

And all these, Lusseyron feels, blend into a single fundamental sense, a deep attentiveness, a slow, almost prehensile attention, a sensuous, intimate being at one with the world which sight, with its quick, flicking, facile quality, continually distracts us from.

In an article in *The Guardian* in June 2005 Mark Lythgoe, a neurophysiologist, also stresses the importance of touch in understanding the world. He refers to a case described to him by Richard Gregory, emeritus professor of neuropsychology at the University of Bristol, of a man who was blind from birth and regained his sight after a corneal graft.

‘After the operation he could, to Gregory's surprise, walk down hospital corridors without holding on to walls. Soon after leaving hospital he asked the professor to take him to the Science Museum to see an exhibit of a simple lathe. With the lathe in the glass case he was unable to say anything about the object. When the case was opened and he was allowed to run his hand over the machine, he understood everything about it. *Now that I've felt it I can see*, he said.

Bizarrely, he was effectively “blind” to objects he hadn’t touched: he had to make the connection between the feel and the image of the lathe before he could see it. It is impossible for those of us with normal vision to imagine this predicament – to be blind to an object you can see in front of you – yet it suggests that in some way we can see with touch, even that we need touch to see.’

Lythgoe ends his article by asserting that the “relationship between touching and knowing is possibly one of the cornerstones for our human experience and communication.”

Touch is many things and can be described by science in wondrous detail, yet it was the deafblind Helen Keller who brought us to a core understanding of our relationship with touch: *My hand is to me what your hearing and sight together are to you .. it is the hand that binds me to the world of men and women.*

Furthermore, in an interview given by Stevie Wonder and published in The Guardian in November 2005 he was asked whether he thought the imagination becomes a form of sight in itself:

‘He nods. *I think it is because you create a sense of very vivid places you can go to, and see what’s going on in your mind.* He often talks about *seeing* things – casually and without irony. As far as Wonder is concerned, he does see, he just has a different way of doing so. A few years ago, he visited a specialist who offered him an operation to make him see. Wonder never bothered. He said that on balance he was happy as he was.’

### **The Process: Brian Friel's Diary.**

28 Aug 1992: Went to an eye specialist in Letterkenny yesterday. He says I have incipient cataracts (just the aging process?) and perhaps glaucoma. He is to arrange a meeting with an ophthalmologist in Berry.

12 Aug 1993: Making notes on the blind play. Who are these people and what is their story?

'She says, "I am content when wakening birds,  
Before they fly, test the reality

Of misty fields, by their sweet questionings;

But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields

Return no more, where, then, is paradise?’ Wallace Stevens

Blackbirds - wakened birds - innuendoes - testing reality - sight restored?

### **The Play**

*Molly Sweeney* is certainly a small and intimate play – a chamber piece – concentrating on the choices, understandings and problems of individuals; but does it also have a political dimension? Finton O’Toole, in an article for the production at the Almeida Theatre, argues:

*‘Molly Sweeney’ is a private, internal version of the public and political story that is told in many of Friel’s plays. By losing her blindness, Molly loses a whole mental world, a way, not just of sensing, but of interpreting and understanding. By refusing to acknowledge that Molly had her own way of sensing the world around her ... Frank and Dr Rice act like colonisers or missionaries, blundering about in a world they do not understand and undermining it with their arrogant enthusiasm. The parallels between this private loss and the public losses of other Friel plays make it difficult to avoid the sense that there is .. an element of political metaphor at work.*

Karen Moloney, in an essay *Molly Astray* in 2000, takes a more explicitly feminist approach:

*As colonisers, these men (Frank, Mr Rice, and Molly’s father) repress deviance among those they rule. Just as real Irish women were shut out of power in post-colonial Ireland Molly and her mother are shut away, deprived of power, and subjugated to a male agenda. Such victimisation also suggests the difficulties Irish women endure in a still decidedly patriarchal state. Sadly, Molly’s restriction of choice in Friel’s play reflects the predicament of many real women in contemporary Ireland.*

Judge for yourself: it is a rich and ambivalent play.

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‘And He came to Bethsaida. And they brought a blind man to Him and begged Him to touch him. And He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the town. And when He had spat on his eyes and had put His hands on him, He asked him if he saw anything. And he looked up and said, I see men as trees walking. And after that He put His hands again on his eyes and made him look up. And he was restored and saw all clearly.’

*St Mark’s gospel: 8:22-25*

## Proscenium

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Or send us an email: [info@proscenium.org.uk](mailto:info@proscenium.org.uk)

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## Our Next Production

### The Recruiting Officer

By George Farquhar

*The Recruiting Office* by George Farquhar is one of the late masterpieces of Restoration comedy. Its twin themes of loving and fighting meet in the refreshing background of a small Shropshire town...where devious London manners come up against a settled country society.

As a contemporary critic commented: "It is a charm of gaiety and good humour throughout." It's funny, too!

At the Travellers Studio, Harrow Arts Centre, March 29<sup>th</sup> to April 1<sup>st</sup> 2006

For further details contact

**Proscenium Box Office**      020 8866 7075

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**In accordance with the requirements of the Council:**

**"Persons shall not be permitted to sit or stand in any of the gangways intersecting the seating, or to sit in any of the other gangways."**