

## MEDIA RELEASE

### *Soulpepper presents Irish Playwright Brian Friel's Faith Healer*

Toronto, ON – March 29, 2010 – **Albert Schultz**, Founding Artistic Director of Soulpepper Theatre Company, today announced that the company's production of *Faith Healer* will run April 29 - June 4, 2010, at the Young Centre for the Performing Arts.

One of the masterworks of twentieth-century Irish drama, *Faith Healer* is a disturbing and humorous meditation on relationships and the truth/lies that bind us together. Three fascinating characters - an alcoholic, charismatic faith healer Frank, his love-starved companion Grace and his devoted promoter Teddy - tell conflicting versions of the same story. Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* begs the question: is there such a thing as truth or do we simply weave our own tales?

Brian Friel describes *Faith Healer* as a "metaphor for the art, the craft of writing ... And the great confusion we all have about it, those of us who are involved in it. How honourable and dishonourable it can be ..." *Faith Healer* had its first performance on Broadway in 1979, then returned to the Broadway stage in 2006, receiving four Tony Award nominations and winning Best Featured actor in a play.

**Gina Wilkinson** (Shaw Festival: *Born Yesterday*) makes her Soulpepper debut and directs **Brenda Robins** and Soulpepper Founding members **Stuart Hughes and Diego Matamoros** in this compelling and brave play.

*Faith Healer* previews April 29, 2010, opens May 4, and runs until June 4 at the Young Centre for the Performing Arts, located at 55 Mill Street, Building 49, in the Distillery Historic District. Tickets range from \$29 - \$70 and are available by calling the Young Centre box office at 416.866.8666 or by visiting [www.soulpepper.ca](http://www.soulpepper.ca). \$20 tickets are available for 21-30 year-olds at [www.stageplay.ca](http://www.stageplay.ca). StagePlay is sponsored by TD Bank Financial Group.

2010 Soulpepper Lead Sponsors are: Sun Life Financial, Scotiabank Group and TELUS. Soulpepper gratefully acknowledges annual operating support from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Toronto Arts Council.

*Soulpepper Theatre Company is an artist-founded, classical repertory theatre company with a three-tiered mandate: to present the world's greatest stories in vital Canadian interpretations; to train a new generation of theatre artists; and to inspire and enrich youth through mentorship and access programs.*

MEDIA CONTACT:

-30-

Sarah Mackie, Publicist

416.203.6264 x146 / [sarah@soulpepper.ca](mailto:sarah@soulpepper.ca)

## BACKGROUND NOTES

"The last day of August we crossed from Stranraer to Larne and drove through the night to County Donegal. And there we got lodgings in a pub, a lounge bar, really, outside a village called Ballybeg, not far from Donegal Town."

This simple itinerary is one of the few things the three characters in *Faith Healer* fully agree upon. They each recall this specific route, first by boat and then by car, through places that exist in the so-called real world though their final destination is a small fictional town in the heart of the writer's imagination. This passage from Scotland to Ireland brings Frank, Grace and Teddy to a stark confrontation, to the edge of a mystery that haunts each of them. So, one by one, they search their memories to tell us the story of that night, and in the process they reveal much about themselves, and the hard-scrabble, wayfaring life they shared for so many years, as servants - or slaves - to Frank Hardy's faith healing gift (or is it a curse?).

It turns out that what happened that night depends on who's telling the story. All we can be sure of is what each character believes happened because the writer has chosen to tell this story entirely in monologue, or perhaps more accurately, in soliloquy form. This canny decision theatrically reinforces the characters' emotional and physical isolation from each other and heightens Friel's theme of the subjectivity of truth. The soliloquy has long been a theatrical means of penetrating the heart and mind of a character but in *Faith Healer* we become aware that a soliloquy is only one person's interpretation, and therefore not always reliable. Frank, Grace and Teddy speak to us directly, intimately, without interruption or opposition. Each of them is convincing but when key details change, morph, and conflict we have to ask: who's telling the truth? If they're lying, why are they lying? How can we be sure they're lying, and not just mis-remembering? Are these inaccuracies red herrings to lure us into the story, or are they vital clues to what lies unspoken in these characters' hearts and lives?

Some details seem trivial. For example, is Grace the faith healer's wife or his mistress? Is she English or Irish? Others are more troubling. Is Kinlochbervie the small Scottish town where Frank learned about his mother's heart attack, or is it the setting of a different tragic event, powerfully evoked by both Grace and Teddy, yet never even mentioned by Frank? Is Frank himself a real healer tormented by the burden of his gift, or a gifted con man fueled by ego and booze?

In an interview about the play Brian Friel described it as a "metaphor for the art, the craft of writing ... And the great confusion we all have about it, those of us who are involved in it. How honourable and how dishonourable it can be ..." Frank Hardy travels from town to town, laying his hands on hopeful and desperate people and even he doesn't know if he's touched by the angels or a total fraud. He does tell us that every night he knows before he steps on to the platform if he "has it" or not. Sometimes he feels his gift, sometimes he walks confidently into the crowd and transfers healing upon one person, or several people. At other times, no matter what he does nothing happens. Every night, Frank Hardy must take the risk, face the demon, ask the question: can I do it tonight? Am I a miracle worker or a faker? When a writer sits down to write, he or she wrestles with these same questions, and with another one: Is it possible to be both at once?

## BACKGROUND NOTES CONTINUED...

A writer sets out to create a fictional world - a lie - and to fill it with as much truth as she can find in herself and express. Sometimes, magically, it coalesces and audiences are touched. Sometimes it doesn't. The same faith, hope and labour go into both works. The magic cannot be compelled, or assured. Brian Friel wrote plays that were performed all over the world, plays that touched audiences who did not speak English, who would never visit Ireland. And then, in the eighties, after he had written *Faith Healer*, he didn't write much at all. He was busy with other tasks, perhaps, but he also went through a dry period creatively. He outlasted the famine but it's interesting to note that he wrote searchingly about the spectre of failure and the consuming terror of losing one's gift before he supposedly experienced it first hand.

According to Friel there's an "element of the charlatan ... in all creative work" and in this play he bravely confronts that conundrum. Without direct action on stage - so that we could judge for ourselves (because seeing is believing?) - we have to rely on description. Therefore meaning in this play resides not in what actually happened but in who is telling the story, and in how they are telling it. And finally, it is up to us to interpret what we're told, as Frank, Grace, and Teddy do in the telling. Brian Friel says a dramatist's purpose is to honestly depict a man's frustrations and hopes and anguishes ... and in so doing help to make a community of individuals (out of the audience). In this tender, compassionate play, he asks us to enter into the mystery along with the characters, to ponder questions of faith and chance, truth and perception. We, like them, must ultimately decide for ourselves what we believe is true.

Tidbits:

- Frank Hardy has been played by, among others, James Mason (who originated the role in 1979), the great Irish actor Donal McCann, and Ralph Fiennes (in 2006). Donal McCann has said he was daunted by the role of Frank Hardy until "the play whispered to me." According to McCann the play said that his preparation for the role was twenty-five years of being an actor, which he defined as "a quarter century of making mistakes."
- 2009 was a banner year for *Faith Healer*. It was produced at the Sydney Festival in Australia, the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, the Berkshire Theatre Festival, and the Gate Theatre in Dublin.
- Joe Dowling, Artistic Director of the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, is a longtime friend and professional associate of Brian Friel. This past fall he made his American acting debut playing Frank Hardy in the Guthrie's production of *Faith Healer*.
- Many of Friel's plays take place in or near the fictional town of Ballybeg. In the Irish language the name means "small town." The Gaelic spelling is Baile Beag. The seminal event of *Faith Healer* happens there.

## BIOGRAPHY: BRIAN FRIEL

1929 – On January 9 a son, Brian, is born to Paddy Friel (some sources say his name is Sean), a primary school teacher, and Christina (some sources say Mary), a postmistress, in Omagh, County Tyrone, Northern Ireland.

1941-1946 – He attends St. Columb's College in Derry.

1946-48 – He gets his B.A. from St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, and has plans to become a priest.

1949-50 – The priesthood is abandoned for St. Joseph's Training College, Belfast, where he qualifies as a teacher.

1954 – He marries Anne Morrison and they go on to have four daughters and a son. They remain married to this day, though Friel is notoriously private and few other details of his personal life are known.

1950 – 1960 – He toils as a teacher in Derry. During this period his first short stories appear in the New Yorker and the BBC Northern Ireland Home Service broadcasts his early radio plays.

1960 – Friel takes the big leap, and becomes a full time writer. His first play, *A Doubtful Paradise*, is produced by the Ulster Group Theatre. It is a far from auspicious début, and the playwright later confesses he's always suspected that his play contributed to the Ulster Group Theatre's demise.

1962 – *The Saucer of Larks*, a book of his short stories is published. He begins writing articles for *The Irish Times* to bolster his income as he struggles to define himself as a writer.

1963 – He has his first theatrical success with *The Enemy Within*, which is produced by the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, going on to an immediate second production at the Lyric in Belfast, and then to a BBC radio adaptation. To learn more about the theatre, he spends several months observing at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis.

1964 – Inspired by his American experience he writes *Philadelphia, Here I Come*, his breakout play. It's a huge hit in Dublin, London and New York and is now believed to be one of the most important Irish plays of the 60s.

1966 – The more financially secure Friel family moves from their longtime residence in Derry to Muff, County Donegal, eventually settling outside Greencastle. A new volume of short stories, *The Gold in the Sea* is published.

## BIOGRAPHY: BRIAN FRIEL CONTINUED

1967 – His play *Lovers* comes out, a drama that is especially popular in the United States in the coming years.

1972 – Friel, hard at work on a new play, marches in a Civil Rights Association protest, which turns into the infamous "Bloody Sunday" massacre that results in 26 civilian casualties, including 13 deaths.

1973 – That new play, deepened by Friel's experience of Bloody Sunday, is called *Freedom of the City*, and is considered an essential work about what is popularly called "The Troubles" in Northern Ireland. More than thirty-five years later it is still frequently produced in his native land.

1974-79 – Friel's writing turns more toward "Chekhovian" themes of family and relationships and he begins experimenting with different ways of telling theatrical stories. Arguably these explorations find their fullest expression in *Faith Healer*, first seen on Broadway in 1979, directed by José Quintero. As with many plays that stand the test of time, it is not an immediate sensation, closing after only 20 performances.

1980 – Along with actor Stephen Rea, Friel founds Field Day Theatre, aiming to produce Irish plays of social significance. Their first production is Friel's *Translations* starring Rea and Liam Neeson. It becomes one of the most frequently staged plays of the post-War period, seen in more than 20 countries (including at Soulpepper in 2004 with a Dora Award-winning performance by Michael Simpson as Jimmy Jack). Friel produces very little new writing in this decade, either due to his many other commitments or because of a prolonged writer's block.

1987 – Friel is appointed to the Seanad Éireann, the Irish Senate, where he serves until 1989.

1989 – The BBC Radio devotes an entire season of broadcast plays to Friel, who becomes the first living playwright to be so honoured.

1990 – He emerges from a decade of near silence with *Dancing at Lughnasa*, his most successful play. It premieres at the Abbey, transfers to London and New York, and wins three Tony Awards including Best Play.

1998 – *Lughnasa* is made into a film starring Meryl Streep.

1998-2003 – Friel produces only a few short plays in this period, often adapting Chekhovian stories or creating new plays using Chekhov's characters. He receives the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Irish Times in 1999.

## BIOGRAPHY: BRIAN FRIEL CONTINUED

2005 – A new full-length play from the now 76 year old writer, *The Home Place*, sells out in Dublin, has a West End run, and makes its American premiere in Minneapolis in 2007 at the Guthrie.

2008 – In November, Queen's University of Belfast announces the construction of The Brian Friel Theatre and Centre for Research.

2009 – Many events commemorate Friel's 80th birthday year. His plays are staged around the world. In Ireland, the Gate Theatre does *Faith Healer*, *The Yalta Game* and *Afterplay* in rep, and the Abbey holds a birthday celebration in September, with an evening of readings by luminaries such as Seamus Heaney. The packed house sings a rousing rendition of "Happy Birthday" to the famous recluse of County Donegal, who is not only present, but is even seen mingling with the audience after the performance.

*Notes by Soulpepper Associate Artist Paula Wing*