

Stage Directions and the Insistent Narrator in Brian Friel

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ABSTRACT: This is a study of the covert narrator in Brian Friel’s plays and is part of a growing interest in narratology in theater. The covert narrator is revealed to readers by means of stage directions, divided into two types: those that can reach the audience and those that must stay with the reader. The character of the covert narrator is revealed principally in directions that are impossible to carry out, which contain free indirect discourse and which editorialize—things only readers can fully appreciate but which are still relevant to the production of the play since the covert narrator is in effect a character in the play. The article presents a close reading of plays from virtually all stages of Friel’s career to demonstrate that it is at those points when communication between on-stage characters breaks down that the covert narrator comes closest to revealing his hand.

KEYWORDS: stage directions, Brian Friel, narrative

Throughout Brian Friel’s career as a playwright, he showed a desire to overcome the traditional division between stage directions and dialogue, between the world of the covert narrator and the world of the characters on stage. To this end, he made use of impossible stage directions: the kind that is easily processed by the reader but very hard to do on stage.¹

There are two types of stage directions: those that can reach the audience and those that must remain with the reader. An example of the first is “*exit*,” of the second “*If she ever had good features there is no trace of them now*” (Friel, *Cass* 186). Whether a direction must stay with the reader is often open to debate. Perhaps a skilled makeup artist could, given the right actor, lighting, and set of circumstances, present the audience with a

character they will believe may have once—but not anymore—had “good features.” Because of this uncertainty, it might be better to talk about a spectrum of stage directions—from the doable to the purely (or nearly purely) readable. A purely readable direction would be, for example, to enter a stage that one has not left. The simple expedient of reading out undoable directions is passed over here, but the matter will be returned to since in many ways it is central to this article. Dialogue may be considered a direction to utter words and is therefore always “doable” in principle. As Patricia A. Suchy puts it, “We might say that a play’s literary text is made entirely of stage directions, including the lines that are spoken aloud” (72).

A further division could be made: into directions that are usually done (e.g., “*exit*”) and those that are usually acted (e.g., “*Hamlet kills Laertes*”). However, both kinds can still reach the audience—the former by being physically done, the latter by being acted (mimed, etc.), or depicted in some way. Thus, even rather extravagant stage directions, such as O’Casey’s demand to flood the stage in *Purple Dust*, fall under the heading of “doable.” This is true also of Sarah Kane’s grotesquely cruel directions (to mutilate a character) in *Cleansed*, an example Jan Alber describes as “unstageable” (88), at least when taken literally (Claycomb 171–72). It is unlikely that any theater group will flood its stage, mutilate its actors, or murder its star during a performance, but the illusions that these things are happening can, with varying degrees of realism, be created, if the director wishes.

One could debate whether an actor following the direction “pretends to think” is acting or doing, but from our point of view what matters is that the direction can—though perhaps with difficulty—be transmitted to the audience. (If the context is unclear or the actor is less skilled, the audience may think that the character really is thinking.)

Both types of stage directions have artistic value. The former (doable) tend to attain this artistic value when they are carried out. That is, few would regard the words “fade to black” in themselves as poetry, but a stage fading to black may well bring a tear to the eye. This is only a tendency, however, and in principle all elements of a poetic work (understood here, after Jakobson, as a “. . . message whose aesthetic function is

its dominant") have artistic value.² "*Exeunt*" is hardly poetic, but neither is "Who's there?" and both are from *Hamlet*, even if Shakespeare only wrote the latter, the first spoken words of the play. In stage directions of the second type, the poetic function is often more prominent but may be eclipsed by the communicative function.

"Doable" stage directions reach the audience through the mediation of directors, actors, stage crew, and technicians. As such, they are often written with these addressees in mind and may therefore be unattractive to the ordinary reader. "Reader-oriented" stage directions, conversely, may be unattractive to impatient directors (as directors) but in principle virtually all directions can be mediated and transmitted to the audience, though often with great difficulty.³ As Nancy Anne Cluck puts it, with reference to the character of Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*, "The figurative language may inspire the actors to portray the sensitivity of Laura, but only the reader can perceive the enclosed lyric structure of the written direction" (88). Stage directions are just as amenable to literary analysis as dialogue and interact closely with that dialogue (Suchy 76–77).

Manfred Jahn identifies three interpretative approaches to drama that he calls "Poetic Drama," "Theater Studies," and "Reading Drama" (660). The first "prioritizes the dramatic text," the second prioritizes performance, and the third "envisages an ideal recipient who is both a reader and a theatergoer" (661, 662). Although this third approach would seem to be the ideal to aspire to, this study belongs to the first named approach: "Poetic Drama"—although hopefully it is not marked by a "dislike of actors, audiences and theatrical institutions" (661). For this reason, those interested in performance studies will not find much of interest here. For this reason, too, approaches that play down the importance of stage directions because some (or even most) directors ignore them are rejected.⁴ Stage directions are regarded here as integral parts of the play text, no more to be ignored than, say, the descriptive passages in novels that many readers do, in fact, skip.⁵ Nonetheless, when writing about a work of art, it is not standard practice to pretend that some parts of it do not exist.

One objection to the study of stage directions is that their provenance is unclear. "The modern practice of publishing 'acting versions' of scripts with stage directions taken from original productions," Suchy writes,

“further confounds the problem; in such cases, authorship of the stage direction may be multiple, and extremely difficult to pull apart” (71). Ryan Claycomb, too, draws attention to the stifling effect a successful production can have on later productions as the stage directions used in the earlier performance become canonized, as it were. Under the heading of “Here’s How We Produced the Play (and How Someone Else Might, Too): The Past Practitioner as Protagonist,” he gives the example of Peter Shaffer’s *Equus* (174). The approach in this article is to treat the author’s name as shorthand for all those people who shaped the published version, which is the object of study.

As it happens, the work of Brian Friel provides one particularly clear example of this many-handedness in action. In *The Loves of Cass McGuire*, he writes in the stage directions that he chose Wagner as the background music to the characters’ rhapsodies but dropped it because two of the actors were so good that the music would have been a distraction: “But I have left the directions for the music in the text because subsequent companies may not be so fortunate . . .” (Friel, *Cass* 179).

This, most would agree, is the voice of the real, “biographical” Brian Friel, and the words are directed to real people and concern the real world. Sometimes, however, Friel, as Alan Dessen puts it, slips into the narrative itself.⁶ In principle, this voice belongs to what Suchy understands as a “fictive narrator” (80; see also Jahn 673)—not the real-life, flesh-and-blood playwright. As such, the voice must be taken into account in any analysis of a play, even if, as is usually the case, the voice remains off stage and unspoken. Questions that may be asked include: Is the narrator male or female? (Richardson 691–92). Is he or she being ironic (Looby 211)?

If the decision is made to read out stage directions, the problem of conveying reader-only directions—and thus something (more) of the covert narrator’s persona—is solved. However, the narrator is in the process turned from a covert presence into an overt one. As such, he or she becomes a character in the play, and characters in plays are set in motion by another narrator. Thus, there will always be a covert narrator. To illustrate this, consider Genette’s example, “Hernani removes his coat” (32; see also Jahn 667). If these words are spoken aloud by a voice (whether on-stage or off) while the actor playing Hernani removes his coat, we still

have a narrator (overt) telling one actor to take off his coat and a (covert) narrator telling another actor to say “Hernani removes his coat.” The presence of this second-degree, covert narrator would be made clearer still if the actor did not, in fact, remove his coat—in other words if the stage directions, as apparently so often happens, were ignored. In this case, the audience is likely to perceive the overt narrator as an unreliable one. But the covert narrator is still there: after all, *someone* decided that there should be a clash between the actions of Hernani and the words of the narrator.

Jahn in this context refers to a “quotationally superordinate narrative agent of the stage directions who shadows [the] first-degree narrative with a first degree narrative of his/her/its own” (672). Friel presents us with a clash between the two kinds of narrators in *Living Quarters*, which is opened by a character called Sir narrating the action: “It is here on May 24th some years ago that our story is set . . .” (Friel, *Living* 185). Sir continues, explaining that the Butlers “. . . have conceived this (*ledger*) – a complete and detailed record . . .” (185). Here, the covert narrator breaks into Sir’s monologue with the word “ledger” bracketed and in italics. This is a “typical” stage direction in that it can be transmitted to the audience by the actor playing Sir without having to utter the word “ledger.” Sir reads from this ledger what are, in effect, stage directions: “Yes – let’s begin here: ‘It is late afternoon. Anna is in bed’” (187). The actor would presumably pause before “It is late afternoon” and change his intonation, signaling to the audience that he is reading someone else’s instructions (in terms of the fictive world of the play the instructions are written by the Butlers themselves). A little later Sir continues, “So. We require only Tina at the moment . . .” (187). However, it is Father Tom who enters. The presence of the covert narrator is underlined by the failure of the overt narrator’s instructions to mesh with what actually happens on stage, which is determined by the covert narrator.

Although Brian Friel claimed not to be a fan of Sean O’Casey, the two playwrights share a fondness for novelistic descriptions in their stage directions. Compare, for instance, Sean O’Casey’s “*Leaning against the dresser is a long-handled shovel – the kind invariably used by labourers when . . .*” (5) and Friel’s “*He [Knox] walks with the slow, sleepy movements*

of *early-morning workmen*" (Friel, *Volunteers* 99). If O'Casey is right, at least the laborers in the audience will know who invariably uses such long-handled shovels. If Friel is right, some early risers in the audience will recognize in the gait of the actor playing Knox the movements of early morning workmen. Readers, on the other hand, need not be laborers or early birds to understand the import of the shovel and the walk. From their point of view, O'Casey and Friel do not even have to be correct.

However, as Benstock writes, whenever O'Casey "... assumed the novelist's prerogative in editorializations about his fictional people, he was careful to justify that usurpation by embodying the underlined characteristics in speech and in action, often giving his initial stage descriptions the benefit of hindsight" (119). Such directions gravitate toward the reader but they can be mediated by actors and are clearly intended to be so mediated. This can be contrasted with the situation described by Martin Meisel in *Hamlet*: "For the reader [. . .] an awareness of Hamlet's anomalous presence (which staging would make conspicuous) is essential to grasping the underlying drama as Claudius passes . . ." (45-46). That is, readers might forget Hamlet's presence until he speaks, since there are no stage directions of the type "Hamlet sulks," "Hamlet says nothing," or "Hamlet is agitated." Extensive stage directions are for the benefit of actors, producers, directors, and crew, but they also facilitate readers, and although Friel's plays are by no means closet dramas or unperformable, he often writes stage directions as a novelist might rather than a working playwright. This is not to say that he always spells things out for the reader. In *Crystal and Fox*, Papa and Fox hold a raffle that has been fixed for Papa to win. When the winning ticket number is called out, Papa simply emerges from the crowd to claim his prize. There is no earlier stage direction of the type "*Papa leaves Fox to mingle unobtrusively with the crowd.*" The absence of such a direction seems calculated to create a different reaction in the reader to that of the audience since they will probably have seen Papa in the crowd on the stage. (Although there is no stage direction, the actor must be on the stage if he is to step out of the crowd to claim his prize.)

In *The Communication Cord*, the stage directions put the word "traditional" in inverted commas on both occurrences in the description of the

setting: a traditional Irish cottage. No one in the audience can see the ironically used inverted commas, but the set designer can, and even if he or she produces a set that looks traditional—not “traditional”—the sham nature of the cottage is pointed out in the dialogue. Like O’Casey, Friel usually gives his stage directions “the benefit of hindsight.”

Another example can be found in *Aristocrats*, whose opening stage directions read “Before that it [the lawn] was a grass tennis court and before that a croquet lawn – but no trace of these activities remains” (Friel, *Aristocrats* 269). If no trace remains, then no director can show that the garden was once a tennis court, at least not without breaking an explicit instruction from the author. However, Friel is not being self-indulgent here; nor is he writing with only the reader of the play in mind. Later on, Casimir says he is “On the tennis court – just beside the tent” (282). At the start of act two Casimir is “*looking for the holes left by croquet hoops*” (308). The audience cannot very well tell what exactly it is that even the most talented actor playing this scene is looking for, but it is later verbalized when Casimir announces he has found a hole (310). Later still, the garden’s past incarnation as a croquet lawn is made explicit in the dialogue by Claire (316). Friel does something very similar in *The Communication Cord*, writing that “*A hundred years ago this was the area of the house where animals were bedded at night*” (Friel, *Communication* 125). This is mentioned a few pages later in the dialogue, when Jack gives a tour of the house (132). The stage direction is therefore superfluous for the director *as* director.

Sometimes, the “editorialization” is less definitively justified. In the initial (nonitalicized) stage directions of *The Freedom of the City*, we learn of Skinner that “He is described as ‘glib’ but the adjective is less than just” (Friel, *Freedom* 10). He is indeed described as “glib,” by another of the characters, Lily (31). For the reader, the question of whether “glib” is too small a word for Skinner—the second half of the covert narrator’s claim—is to a large extent settled by Friel’s say-so. For the viewer of the play, the skill of the actor playing Skinner—as well as the overall quality of the individual production—is decisive. “Professional” readers (directors and actors) are in a different position: their task is to make Friel’s “editorialization” come true, though, as mentioned earlier and by

many commentators, stage directions are a low priority for some directors. Even if the producers do take the instruction seriously, they may decide that the covert narrator is wrong and that Skinner really is merely glib. Fifty years ago, Auréliu Weiss wrote that it would seem the best actor is the one who has “identity of views and feelings” with the author (49). The actor might not agree with the author, though. This problem, Weiss continues, was recognized by Shaw, who responded by providing extensive stage directions (49–50). The problem with this approach, however, is that “the author may wish to express one conception of the character or the plot in his stage directions while the inner life of the play brings out another” (52).

Sometimes, Friel lets the novelist in him get the better of the playwright. In *Living Quarters*, there is a clash between overt and covert narrators, and there are some choices that can only be appreciated by the reader. Act two contains a stage direction (a “real” stage direction, not one read out by Sir) that refers to “. . . a gaiety or, as SIR calls it, a ‘giddiness’ that permeates . . .” (Friel, *Living* 229). In fact, Sir uses the word “gaiety,” not the word “giddy”: “SIR There’s always a gaiety at this stage” (240). It is Ben who uses the word “giddy,” saying that he also feels “euphoric” (230). The stage directions tell us that “*Now that they are all together the euphoric atmosphere is heightened*” and, later, “*The gaiety ebbs quickly away*” (232, 241). Only the reader of the play can hope to appreciate this interplay between Sir’s stage directions and the covert narrator’s stage directions unless the stage directions are read out.

In *Wonderful Tennessee*, we also find a conflict between the stage directions and the dialogue that throws into relief some of the issues discussed in the opening paragraphs here. The initial stage directions read, “The pier was built in 1905” (Friel, *Wonderful* 160). No verification of this is given in the dialogue, so it is a reader-oriented direction. As a practical matter, one could convey this to the audience using the set design: a plaque commemorating the building of the pier might be visible, for example. The size of such plaques means that this would be difficult to show to an audience in a theater. Making the information available to viewers by putting an out-sized plaque on the pier (legible to spectators in the back row) would mark the information in a way that the

written stage directions do not. To put it crudely, the theater audience will wonder why the year the pier was built is so important. Familiar with Chekhov's gun on the wall that must be fired by act three, they will wonder why they are being told the pier was built in 1905. For the reader the experience is different. Some may indeed wonder why the year is important, but the information is supplied discretely and less likely to act on readers as it would on audiences.⁷

But for the reader, and for the audience too—though to a lesser extent and assuming the director follows the stage direction to cast characters in their late thirties and early forties—the real clash comes when Terry says it has been more than forty years since he has seen the island they propose to visit. Terry says earlier that he was there once, at the age of seven (Friel, *Wonderful* 184). This would make Terry at least 48—about five to ten years older than the directions demand. The obvious explanation is that Terry is mistaken or lying, but it could also be the covert narrator that is lying. If the stage directions were read out, creating an overt narrator, the question would be unavoidable. Some audience members would assume that Friel (the real, flesh-and-blood author) had made a mistake; others would question the reliability of this now overt narrator. However, the question of reliability is there even if the directions are not read out. A review of the 1993 Abbey Theatre production suggests that—whatever about the ages of characters and actors—this uncertainty was captured by the cast and crew: “director Mason’s achievement is to delineate a world pitched halfway between literalism and symbolism, reality and the imagination, matched by a beautifully detailed set which nonetheless seems to float on the Abbey stage” (Wolf). The part of Terry in this production was played by Donal McCann, who was 50. In the 2016 edition of the play used here, Terry says it is over thirty years since he has been to the island. However, in *Plays Two* (1999) it is forty years. Thus, a further complication inevitably enters the picture: the possibility that we are dealing with a simple typographical mistake. The covert and overt narrators are not always so easily distinguished from one another.

Throughout Friel’s career as a playwright, he showed a desire to overcome the traditional division between stage directions and dialogue, between the world of the covert narrator and the world of the characters

on stage. As far back as 1962, in *The Enemy Within*, we find dialogue being subsumed into stage directions: “CAORNAN *shakes his head: No, no*” (Friel, *Enemy* 16). Are the words “No, no” spoken or thought? Are they Caornan’s words or the narrator’s words? Of relevance here is the fact that Caornan is speaking to Dochonna, who is hard of hearing. Where communication between characters is difficult, the covert narrator, albeit briefly, cautiously, reveals his presence (or her presence—there is no need to assume that this is Friel’s voice, any more than there is to assume that the “I” in a first-person novel is the author’s voice). The play also contains a stage direction that with its modal verb belongs in the novelist’s bag of tricks: “DIARMUID *stands aghast. He might even consider trying to joke his way out of another sea journey*” (40). An impatient actor might wonder what the point of this direction is. The joke is either in the dialogue or it is not, regardless of whether the actor does or does not pretend to consider it. (Diarmuid says “My stomach, Columba” [40], which might be considered a joke, but only the reader knows that he “might” have considered it. Once the actor has played his part, the audience knows one way or the other.)

In other plays Friel uses variations of an “as if” formula to blend characters’ lines and the lines of the covert narrator. In *Lovers: Losers* (first performance in 1967), we find “ANDY *spreads his hands: ‘What can I reply to that?’ the gesture says*” (Friel, *Lovers* 306). Thirty years later, in *Give me your answer, do!*, we have “He [Jack] *spreads his hands as if to say ‘That explains everything’*” (Friel, *Give* 333). The question marks in another stage direction in the same play also show Friel using a novelist’s device: “He [Jack] *looks into each face in turn, lingering with each for a moment – hoping for a gesture of support? Bracing himself against rejection? Before moving on to the next person*” (371). This direction contains valuable information for the actors but the uncertainty of the covert narrator is there only for the reader to appreciate. Even more clearly novelistic is the direction “*The silence is broken by the sobbing. The sobbing may last for ever*” (Friel, *Give* 371). The sobbing will last as long as the producer of the play decides and not a moment longer. The second sentence is a readers-only direction.

The covert narrator's insertion of him or herself into the play can also be observed in *Wonderful Tennessee*: "She [Angela] spreads her hands as if to say 'What's the point? Can't you see there's no point?'" (Friel, *Wonderful* 233). If we take the view that this is no more than an instruction to an actor, "What's the point?" is enough. The addition of "Can't you see there's no point?" is for readers and probably tells them as much about the covert narrator as it does about Angela.

Friel's 1987 adaptation of *Fathers and Sons* contains the line "VASSILY responds by putting his finger to his lips and shaking his head as if to say – Say nothing; don't interrupt" (Friel, *Fathers* 314). All the information the actor needs is contained in the straightforward instruction to put his finger to his lips and shake his head. It is hard to see how an audience seeing an actor perform these gestures could misunderstand, and yet Friel adds "Say nothing; don't interrupt."

The Munday Scheme (first performance in 1969) contains the following undoable stage direction: "MAHON: You and I can comprehend it all, Mick – (A lie.) but country people would be frightened off with leases and legal papers and –" (Friel, *Munday* 41). If Friel had had in mind first and foremost the director and actors, he could have written at the start of the play that Mahon and Mick are "not as intelligent as they think they are." The comic timing of the remark—the way it is dropped into a line of dialogue—is something that only readers can really appreciate.⁸

In some cases, the direction is doable, but its surface form—of free indirect discourse—is aimed at readers. In *The Munday Scheme* Friel on at least two occasions puts what would normally be dialogue into italicized stage directions: "(MOLONEY: gazes alertly: what is RYAN talking about?)" and "(MAHON looks at his watch – marmalade at this hour? – and raises his eyebrows in mockery)" (Friel, *Munday* 26, 33). The situation and the raising of the actor's eyebrows convey what is going on, but the words "marmalade at this hour" are not doable in any meaningful sense. They represent the thoughts of the character, which are not uttered aloud and therefore remain inaccessible to the audience—though it would be a mistake to underestimate the capabilities of a good actor. *Dancing at Lughnasa* also has this free indirect discourse: "She looks quickly around: did her sisters hear that?" (Friel, *Dancing* 500). The thought as it went

through the character's mind would have been "Did *my* sisters hear that?" As given in the text it is "did her sisters hear that?", blending her point of view and that of the covert narrator.

Gunther Martens and Helena Elshout argue that even in a play "with a fairly classical form," primary and secondary texts—dialogue and stage directions—are intertwined (86). It is in *Translations* that dialogue and stage directions are most inextricably intertwined. Friel uses both "ordinary," doable instructions that can reach the audience and directions that must stay with the reader. Act one opens with businesslike stage directions such as "*A window right*" and "*... upstairs living quarters, of...*" but already some instructions are aimed primarily at readers: "*SARAH'S speech defect is so bad that all her life she has been considered locally to be dumb*" (Friel, *Translations* 417). It would be extremely hard to act this last stage direction in such a way as to unequivocally make clear to the audience that Sarah is considered—but not actually—dumb, but it is useful information for the cast and crew, telling the actors something about how to react to Sarah.

Act two, however, starts with directions pitched very much at readers only: "*The sappers have already mapped most of the area. YOLLAND'S official task, which OWEN is now doing, is to take each of the Gaelic names [...] and anglicize it [...]. These new standardized names were entered into the Name Book, and when the new maps appeared they contained all these new anglicized names*" (448). That most of the area has been mapped is suggested by the subsequent action, but the directions here move from present perfect to past simple. Events recounted in the past simple move us outside the play since the maps have not yet appeared (they are still at the Name-Book stage, as is clear from the context). This is an almost totally undoable direction, referring, as it does, to historical events that took place after the events described in the play take place. Friel quickly reverts to the present tense: "*The hot weather continues. It is late afternoon some days later*" (448).

It is in the speech and actions of Sarah in the first place that Friel collapses the conventional distinction between stage directions and dialogue. It starts off quite innocently. "*SARAH shakes her head vigorously and stubbornly*" is an italicized stage direction that is also, for her, dialogue (418).

This is not unusual, but it should remind us that plays are made up entirely of stage directions. The line of dialogue that follows—“MANUS Come on, Sarah,” (418)—is really a direction to the actor playing Manus to utter the given words. In the case of both Manus and Sarah, the actor has been instructed to communicate, whether by words or by gestures. The equal rights of stage directions and dialogue are stressed more forcibly in the following exchange:

MANUS Yes, I know he’s at the christening; but it doesn’t take them all day to put a name on a baby, does it?

SARAH *mimes pouring drinks and tossing them back quickly.*

You may be sure. Which pub?

SARAH *indicates.*

Gracie’s?

No. Further away.

Con Connie Tim’s?

No. To the right of there.

Anna na mBréag’s?

Yes. That’s it. (421–22)

Here, Friel moves from “normal” stage directions, written conventionally in italics, to quasi-dialogue. It might be objected that this is a trivial question of choosing Roman type over italics or vice versa, but it is trivial only for the audience. For readers, it is potentially of as much significance as the distinction between direct speech and free indirect discourse in novels. And whatever else they may be, directors and actors are also readers. Their understanding of the stage directions will be in some way be transmitted to the audience.

Stage directions undergo this transformation into quasi-dialogue in other parts of the play. For example, there is the following stage direction/dialogue: “LANCEY *looks to OWEN: Is that all?* OWEN *smiles reassuringly and indicates to proceed*” (444). Interestingly, Lancey is, somewhat like Sarah, effectively dumb—able to communicate verbally and directly only with Owen among the local Irish speakers.

Similarly, Sarah can speak only with Manus. A third example of this quasi-dialogue occurs in the conversation between Maire and Yolland in act two, scene two. At first, they converse fluently, but as they become embarrassed communication falters and finally breaks down until we come across italicized stage directions that read more like a character's interior monologue: "YOLLAND Every-morning-I-see-you-feeding-brown-hens-and-giving-meal-to-black-calf – (*The futility of it*) – Oh my God." This is mirrored by Maire, who tries Latin: "MAIRE – et es in castris quae – quae – quae sunt in agro – (*The futility of it*) – Oh my God" (468, 469).

At these points in the play, when normal communication between the characters is stretched to breaking point, the covert narrator steps forward from the shadows to take on the burden of communication. Friel projects a character into the play—not an all-knowing extradiegetic narrator. Particularly in the case of "the futility of it" we hear a voice that is on the same emotional plane as the characters in the play.

One possibility is to read out the stage directions, or perhaps project them onto a screen in the form of surtitles, thus giving audience members the same access to the figure of the covert narrator that the reader has.⁹ This was done in the Donmar Warehouse production of *Aristocrats* (director Lyndsey Turner, designer Es Devlin). Turner and Devlin, the reviewer wrote in the *Guardian*, took "a meta-theatrical approach. The action takes place in a sunken pit and the Big House, as it is called, is symbolised by a miniature replica; the cast sits at the pit's perimeter and the stage directions are read aloud" (Billington 13). A director deciding to present stage directions in this way cannot be denied his or her artistic freedom. Friel's stage directions have been described as "careful and specific" (Murray viii), but he is not dictatorial: in *The Loves of Cass McGuire* he writes, "Each of the three characters who rhapsodize [. . .] takes the shabby and unpromising threads of his or her past life and weaves it into a hymn of joy [. . .]. (And to pursue the musical imagery a stage further and, as a signpost for future productions, I consider this play to be a concerto in which Cass McGuire is the soloist)" (Friel, *Cass* 179). His direction is only a "signpost," and rather than saying the play is a concerto, he only says that he considers it to be one. In *Molly Sweeney*, he

only suggests “that each character inhabits his/her own special acting area . . .” (Friel, *Molly* 255). And yet, whether stage directions are signposts or suggestions, playwrights might be alarmed to find themselves (or their implied selves) written into plays by having their directions read out. Brian Friel may not have been dictatorial, but he came out against directorial interpretations, regarding his script as final (McGrath 143–44).

A director might have someone read out the instructions to Sir in *Living Quarters*. The audience would form an opinion of this new narrator as it would of any character in the play, making for a particularly clear case of “epic theatre” in Bernhard Asmuth’s understanding (56). The basis for such an opinion would be the stage directions (now, at least partly converted into dialogue), but even if the stage directions are not read out, the covert narrator may still be considered a character in his or her play—a character we access and assess to a considerable extent through the stage directions.

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NOTES

1. Parts of this article appeared in Looby, Robert. “Didaskalia w *Przekładach* Briana Friela,” trans. Michał Lachman. *Acta Universitatis Lodzianis Folia Litteraria Polonica* 24, no. 2 (2014): 113–23. I would like to thank the editors, Michał Lachman and Małgorzata Leyko, for their permission to reprint.

2. Jakobson’s definition is “a verbal message whose aesthetic function is its dominant” (emphasis added). I have adapted it here to encompass theatrical works (Jakobson 43).

3. “Reader-oriented” directions would correspond with Michael Issacharoff’s “autonomous” directions (Issacharoff 20–21).

4. See, for example, (Pavis 89).

5. As Carlson says, “any author, in setting a work before the reading public, necessarily renounces a certain control of the work to the reading process” (45).

6. "Elsewhere, a reader can sense a dramatist slipping into his narrative while writing a stage direction . . ." (Dessen 26).

7. A film version of the play could presumably also convey the information without drawing undue attention to it by panning past a plaque in an establishing shot.

8. This is somewhat similar to Shaw's sense of timing in act five of *Pygmalion*, except that it is the *absence* of stage directions at one point that makes the reader's and the audience's experience diverge. The direction remains implicit in Mrs. Higgins's line, "Please dont grind your teeth, Henry" (Shaw 127). The audience will have either heard the actor grinding his teeth or not, but only the reader can fully appreciate the comic timing here: the admonition comes out of the blue, since there is no instruction to the actor to grind his teeth. The humor need not be lost on the audience either, but it is certain to be of quite a different kind.

9. Some theaters and many films use audio description for the benefit of the blind and partially sighted. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in such circumstances the blind sometimes lead the sighted in understanding.

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