

DANCING AT LUGHNASA

The story is set in a small town in Donegal in 1936. Meryl Streep plays the part of Kate, a teacher, and the stern self righteous head of a household of five Irish sisters, each of them single, one of them with a small child, Michael.

It is told viewed from the boy, who is aged around six years, growing up with his mother and his aunts in this remote country place. There is a brother Jack, who has been utterly changed by his experiences as a priest in Africa, having adopted the belief systems of the Ugandans; the reverse of the convention that the missionaries went out to 'teach' the Africans about God.

The scenery is achingly beautiful, almost idyllic, but the story is very painful, it's about wasted lives. These sisters have given up their souls to something called 'duty' and 'obligation' and not to mention maintaining the land on which they live and the home that they inhabit. Impoverished, they struggle to get by. Kate loses her job at the school, dismissed by a disapproving parish priest because of the vagaries and eccentricities of her family, including the 'mad' priest brother. Meanwhile the sisters lose the income gained from Rose and Agnes, whose fingers are constantly at work knitting garments for a local trader.

They lose out to a wool factory that is newly built and introduced to the town. As a backdrop to all this the locals are celebrating the pagan feast of Lughnasa, festival to the sun god, a feast day joyously remembered and celebrated still by the people, who build fires, drink potheen, sing and dance.

Raucous and wild, this scene demonstrates the deep held pagan traditions that

still hold sway, despite the interference of the church in Ireland. This scene is contrasted beautifully by Kate's constant moralising, endless references to religion and tiresome opining about what is, or not, morally acceptable.

In the end two sisters leave, and the rest remain behind. One of them, the mother of the boy Michael, loses her charming, idealistic, but emotionally immature English lover to the Spanish Civil War. She resigns herself to her fate and submits to work in the very factory that ruined the sister's livelihood. The other sisters gently rot away, Kate making a last futile stab at supporting the household. .

The forces that they are confronted with throughout, colonialism, the church, economic repression and social stigmatising combine to defeat the sisters in the end.

There is a strong message about the disintegrating affect of imperialism both in Africa and Ireland, the fragmentation of indigenous belief systems, language, and identity. The imposer faith then purports to provide succour and balm to the oppressed, in the classic dichotomy of abuser and abused.

All this is familiar territory in Ireland and in other parts of the world where there has been cultural and spiritual genocide. The film is hauntingly sad and yet there is one great moment where these four passionate Irish women, throw away their cares and dance again, infected by the spirit of the pagan festival. In this pivotal scene they perform a wild circle dance, possessed by the ceileidh music that they hear on the wireless. Even stoic and sensible Kate joins in. It is a

moment of symbolic re-awakening.

The power, and beauty of the fiery dance, is witnessed by the tender young Michael, who is biding his time, waiting to grow up and become a man.

The playwright is Brian Friel, screenplay Frank McGuinness. Meryl Streep is Kate.

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