"I Cannot Place You": Dementia and the Pandemic Experience in The Visiting Hour *by Frank McGuinness*

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This paper presents a new play by Frank McGuinness, a play which was streamed to audiences in April 2021 and published a few weeks later. Set in contemporary Ireland, it focuses on two themes which seem to preoccupy its author: dementia, to which he devoted another play, *Hanging Gardens* and the consequences of living in a time of Pandemic. In particular, I argue, McGuinness indirectly seems to address an important question: how can literature and theatre offer an opportunity for reflecting about what is happening around us? Can literature help us to better understand and face the world? The play foregrounds the restorative power of emotional authenticity as we see a father and his daughter struggle over forgetfulness.

Keywords: Frank McGuinness, dementia, Covid-19 pandemic and literature.

Written by Frank McGuinness during the 2020 lockdown, *The Visiting Hour* features Stephen Rea and Judith Roddy as the elderly father and his daughter who visits him in his nursing home during the Covid Pandemic. As the menace of time takes over during the conversation, memories movingly unfold and are somehow shared.

Part of the *Gate At Home* initiative, which aimed to stream bespoke productions live, the play was the first online Gate Theatre performance being streamed to audiences on 22, 23 and 24 April, and was made available again from Monday May 10 to Sunday May 23.

The play which aspires to offer an updated look at Ireland living at a time of big social, interrelational difficulties caused by the Covid-19 Pandemic,[1] has a strong cast with Stephen Rea playing the role of

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[1] Surprisingly enough, we are not told where the here of the story is: though we

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the elderly man. Rea is known to many for his work in films such as *Micheal Collins*, *The Crying Game* (for which he was nominated as best actor), *Breakfast on Pluto*, *Bloom*, but he also has a long history in the theatre dating back to Field Day, a company he started in 1980 with Brian Friel.

Judith Roddy, who trained at the Samuel Beckett Centre, Trinity College Dublin, has extensive experience appearing on stage, performing in Friel's *Translations* and Sean O'Casey *The Plough and the Stars* in the National Theatre, London and on Broadway. She also starred in an episode of the acclaimed BBC drama *The Fall*. She is known to viewers from Derry, for her part as Ms. De Brún in Lisa McGee's hit Channel 4 series, *Derry Girls*.

A third character in the play could be said to be the disembodied voice that comes over a speaker, reminding visitors to observe the time limit for their visit. We can hear it several times.

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How do feelings and familial relationships survive through these hard times? What can be said during the only time allowed to a daughter and a father living in a care home, separated by a large pane of glass, as close as the pandemic allows? The play is, like most of his writings, set in a borderland, in a liminal space, "where there is the inarticulateness and the urgency of the language, where there is no intimacy and great warmth, where deviance brings clarity and perversity assertiveness, where the ritualized imagination breaches conventions." (Jordan 2010b: 247-248)

Yet, this time, contrary to many of McGuinness' preceding plays, the context is not provided by important moments of Irish history but by the liminal space that our mind has constructed when the power of memory fails and social relations become scarce.

Observed from the distance of a computer screen, the setting of the new play by Buncrana Frank McGuinness does seem an ideal place where to stage the drama brought about by loneliness and illness. An open studio space with no props except for a chair and a garden bench, one for the father and the other for his daughter.

The simplicity of the place contrasts with the strange, almost colourful look of the male protagonist: dressed up for the occasion

know that Frank McGuinness is Dublin-based, his characters, i.e. the actors chosen for the two roles, do have a strong Northern Irish accent. As a native of Donegal, realities of both parts of Ireland are always present in his work.

with an evening shirt and an outdated velvet dinner jacket, he is barefoot, suspended, unable to go anywhere. This is clarified by the stage directions which set the scene: "The care home is clean and well run, its unseen staff efficient, kind, of different nationalities. Its patients manifest different degrees of forgetfulness. No one here is entirely incapacitated, but no one will be going home." (McGuinness 2021: 10)

Katie Davenport, set and costume designer for *The Visiting Hour* writes about the symbolism attached to the setting and the challenges of designing it:

> There's something really captivating and significant about the scenography and the mise-en-scene of the Gate Theatre space as it stands presently, an interior landscape that carries an immense visual and textual history, and now, also the absence of people. That clearing of space like a frozen forlorn image; the stillness of an empty theatre awaiting and beckoning the return of its community […] This is a sensitive and poignant piece about a visiting hour in a nursing home during the pandemic, where a daughter and father meet. It's about their relationship and the language and musicality they use to communicate.[2]

Against the dark background, we see the two even when the camera zooms on one, as the other one's face is always reflected on the dividing glass, according to Caitriona McLaughlin's brilliant direction.

The bareness of the stage has the precise task of drawing the spectators' interest towards the two protagonists, their exchange of clues, their words, their language, their musicality: the insight is strikingly immediate.

Yet, as we listen and continue listening, we start having difficulty at following their flow of words, which is not presented under the form of a dialogue, but with a series of discontinuous brief clues which go towards opposite directions. At times, then, or we could say, throughout the sixty-minute play, we struggle to understand more and even though we may argue the father suffers from dementia, as part of the audience we insist that we need to learn more about this relationship, sharing the daughter's frustrating efforts to relate, to defend real memories instead of made-up events that have never taken place, yet are consistently asserted without any logical order by the father.

[2] Cf. https://www.rte.ie/culture/2021/0420/1211029-the-visiting-hour-designing-the-gates-first-online-production/, 21 April 2021, accessed on July 23rd.

Again, on the matter the designer specifies:

> The set design is minimal and understated. To let the play speak, all we need is a bench where the Daughter sits, a nursing home chair for Father, a pane of glass that divides them and a tannoy overhead. Judith Roddy, the daughter, takes a lone seat in the clearing of the auditorium to speak to her father (Stephen Rea). He is framed in the stage area of the theatre – that transient space of memory and story reawakened. We wanted to simply show an audience with Father.[3]

The Visiting Hour is then a play about a man who is strongly anchored in his own creeds, his "reimagined past," at a time during which a suspended present forces his daughter to stare at him, debate, reply behind a glass: a time during which we know, as we ourselves have experienced it, that we cannot give kisses or hugs, we must keep distant from others with loneliness increasing the negative effects of ageing more than before.

We feel even more lonely when we imagine an elderly one trapped within the walls of a care house: "Why do you perch yourself sitting outside? Why will they not let you come in? Have you done something?," (McGuinness 2021: 16) Father asks her as the play opens, as if he has once again forgotten about – or, has he ever known that? – the hard times restrictions imposed by the Pandemic.

Is it a naïve form of renewed wonder and expectation that something out in the world is going to change, that people would benefit from the comfort of touch again? There is no way we can be sure of the validity of Father's account and it becomes clear to us that he does not have a full understanding of what is going on around him. At times he strives to discern meaning and when he finds it, it is mediated by his dementia, thus fluctuating from minute to minute.

The script does not give his diagnosis but through its irregular pace and its discontinuous narration, with elements of his life remembered in fragments, we understand that his illness has progressed. Illogical shifts from a topic to another – he reminisces on Camay soap, on Katie Boyle, on being second in the Eurovision context, the Beverly sisters and a variety of other people and objects from his past – make him/us lose touch with reality. Only music, perhaps, together with singing, comes to define the content material of his memories.[4]

[3] Ivi.

[4] Cf. "K-K-K-Katy" by Geoffrey O'Hara; "Are you Sure?" by The Allisons and "Wonderful Dream" by Anne-Marie David.

Music takes over to serve as a logical link, as a way to compensate for the losses of communication, a temporary relief from the hardships of an all Beckettian type of situation. Witty scenes about an imaginary performance in the Eurovision and different songs sung by the two characters at repeated moments are an excellent set-up for connecting the daughter's identity to her father's one: as the reflecting images of the two at times seem one, it is through music that the two seem to remember that they are members of the same family.

Music is then felt to be a natural way of being, feeling closer to her father again, despite the bruteness of Covid-19 restrictions and of his father's memory loss. Trying to remember how good, enjoyable the past was is the dominant linking force of the play: memories of the past seem at times to make us/them forget about the present; a suspended belief keeps the daughter's pain at bay while presenting an emotional world about which we are not entirely convinced, in which we are not wholly involved, as if we were no longer able to have emotions.

This is because the nonsense talk of who he was and what he might have done and been finds no answers. Sparkles of light shake his being: he wants to leave the place even though he does not seem to know who he is nor does he seem to recognize his daughter:

> Where have they taken my ordinary clothes? Who has nicked them? When will I get them back? Can I go home then? Is that why you've come here? Are you to bring me back to my own house? Speak up. Are you? Speak – speak up – (ivi, p. 21)

Worsened by the enclosure brought about by the experience of Covid, the story of a father who is old and is no longer able to remember, is a story of time which does not come back, of chances which are gone, possibly forever. Daughter, though, wants to assert the truth and her despair and anger are chronicled: the need to hold back to the reality of past events, with her strong memories of her mother and friends show that she is still debated between the need to desperately anchor to the past on one side and to protect him from the present on the other:

> The only daughter. The only child. The one who trudges out on her own here, just to see you. Would you prefer if there had been others? Sons – daughters-in-law, grandchildren, my sisters, my brothers, never born – only me. The one girl, just the one girl, that is it, isn't it, Father? Not spoilt though – always giving, never missing a visit. Do you miss me? The rest of the week, when I'm not here, do you miss me?
>
> Silence.

Do I miss you? Me?
Father I cannot place you – are you your sister? (ivi, p. 17)

While the Pandemic is discussed in passing, it is never mentioned by name and does not form a major part of the plot. A brief mention of some medical advice and an insight into a place where people live in isolation, the play takes an unexpected direction when moving the attention towards the tragedy of personal illness, dementia.

Perhaps McGuinness is here simply trying to stress human difficulties when facing the experience of the disintegration of one's mental faculties, as the illness progresses: the incapacity to know who you are and why you are there; the impossibility to get to some solutions.

Through it we come to understand that the only reliable lifeline is deep gone under the sea, the past is forgotten and the present is terrible. No feelings seem to emerge out of their conversation: even the Daughter herself at times shows to be angry, detached, struggling to deal with his rambling stories and being unable to relate to them. Because of this, we are not entirely convinced that her character works well, perhaps because we would like someone less detached, someone who is able to feel and share her emotions. Perhaps, as part of the audience, we would like to do something but we are unable to do so:

Daughter: Maybe then I should just call it a day.
Father: What?
Daughter: Stop, maybe.
Father: Stop.
Daughter: Calling. Visiting.
Father: Visiting – stop? Why?
Daughter: Be free of you. (ivi, p. 27)

The play could then be defined as a perfect example of pandemic narration, a way to represent events and experiences that occur in the present and involve us all. With its suspended yet pressing rhythm, it wants to re/establish a dialogue between a playwright and his audience and generate empathy, reflecting upon notions of trauma and stigma.

Playwriting is then experienced as a new hermeneutic way applicable to the huge problem of contemporary society: Covid-19. Its world addresses issues of social vulnerability with critical reflections upon how the language is used to reflect, to report and renegotiate important values.

If Covid provides the context it does not confine the play: the questions raised by the author are also about the consequences of

suffering from dementia. Besides, McGuinness is well aware that the ageing Irish population will lead to an increasing number of people suffering from it in Ireland. He was already concerned about it when he wrote *The Hanging Gardens* some years before.

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The Hanging Gardens, staged during the 2013 Dublin Theatre Festival, describes a novelist's decline into dementia, as presented through the perspectives of his adult children in a parental home in Donegal. To write the play, after fourteen years of silence, McGuinness carried out some research, interviewing people who had watched an elderly parent stricken by Alzheimer's. He was shocked and moved by the cruelty this disease can afflict on the victim and his/her dear ones.

Very much what happens in *The Visiting Hour*, here two sides of the same character are shown: while memories are doubted, the protagonist, Sam Grant, seems at times perfectly lucid and authoritative and at others, he becomes a confused, upset and aggressive man. Very much like the Daughter, here the three children, two sons and a daughter, in their own way, seem to have only one purpose: responding to their father. It is not an accident that the title is taken from the legendary Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, whose existence has never been proven. If reality contrasts with an imaginary, doubtful past, which cannot really be proven as the children themselves cannot be entirely sure about what happened when they were kids, the garden seems the perfect place where stories are narrated in order to survive a harsher truth, that is dementia. Grant gives an impressionistic, first-person account which does not always find the needed coherence required during a normal communication and by so doing, he succeeds in illuminating on how a disintegrated mind works. As the story unfolds, his grasp of the world fades away and he cannot make sense of the information he gives and is given.

From the opening moments of the play, we understand that the Grants are outsiders, even within their own family: mother Jane prefers plants to people and has neglected her own children so that her garden can flourish; the eldest son Charlie does much for their parents and is not duly praised for that; daughter Rachel is having a child to keep her company, whereas the youngest Grant does not want to confess he is gay. Despite we know more about them than what we know about Daughter, still all the characters seem to be not wholly depicted and are totally dependent on their fathers.

Although there is sadness in both plays,[5] there seem to be a celebration of life and of opportunities out in the world: we know that Daughter will go back to her life to return once again to see her father the following week. Equally, we know that Rachel is expecting a baby – which will change her life – while strongly believing that Grant will come to terms with his sexuality. Both plays do not end in a note of despair nor in unjustified optimism, but with a dignified acceptance of the illness which in a way allows their author some form of liberty, as narration is made fragmentary and the thematic background is not entirely exploited nor truly clarified, with one main character[6] against the others evoking very brief moments of empathy or some sort of affectionate feeling for a loved one.

McGuinness's description of how he conceives Sam is illuminating:

> His whole capacity for telling stories, for spinning yarns, is now suddenly out of control. In a very terrifying way, the boundaries between fact and fiction are extremely blurred and he moves from one world to the other, with great dexterity at times, and, at the same time, he is causing havoc.[7]

It is not the first time dementia and its consequences are discussed in literature. A list of novels, plays and poems can be found in the Alzheimer's Association website, which well demonstrates how such a growing interest is felt by many artists in the world. We could certainly argue that McGuinness may have mentally and physically suffered during the lockdown and may have felt the anxieties of growing old.

[5] McGuinness would say about *The Hanging Garden*: "I hope the audience laughs. And that they're shocked. I try to give them something more than they expect." *A novel idea for playwright McGuinness*, in "The Irish Examiner", https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/arid-20247022.html, 22 October 2013, accessed on 20th June 2021.

[6] "Overall, while the production was high-quality with some beautiful moments, its impact was confusing. Had the writing been clearer or centred on a single issue, and made better use of Roddy's character, the show would have been heart-breaking. As it stands, *The Visiting Hour* was enjoyable but confusing at best, and superficial at worst […] This virtual tour aspect of the production had not only increased outreach and involved local venues but helped people feel as though they were 'attending' their local theatre, perhaps for the first time since the pandemic began. This no doubt lifted people's spirits and gave an important sense of community back to the audience". Aibhe Noonan, 'The Gate Theatre's latest production was high quality but ultimately confusing'.

[7] *A novel idea for playwright McGuinness*, cit.

The assertion of memory and the loss of identity are central to *The Visiting Hour* very much like a persistent, unchangeable, undeniable sense of guilt for the carers, the ones who passively assist and come to confront with the people affected by it; the ones who often feel they cannot do anything about it, the ones who return to open up an almost identical scene with the one which we have already witnessed. As the visiting hour comes to the end, we can only imagine a Beckettian continuation of the story, one where the sequence re/starts – perhaps with some slight differences – and the narrating voice continues to invest itself in story-telling,[8] in its attempt to articulate an identity and to re/awaken the audience's cognitive, hermeneutic abilities.

To conclude, the play gives the author a chance to muse on memory and the role it plays in a father/daughter relationship, perhaps driven by a belief in the possibility of better understanding its cognitive underpinnings, perhaps insisting on the importance of accepting our ignorance about the complex chaotic behaviour of the inside and outside worlds. One well-known tragic emblematic relationship between a father and his children comes to our mind: Shakespeare's *King Lear* is the portrait of an old man whose mind experiences an inexorable decline to the point of being suspected of what we call "dementia." Lear loses his sense of self and because of that he is doomed to be mistreated or even, simply, forgotten. Like Lear, both Father and Sam are given to "unconstant starts" are impetuous and irrational and revert to a state of "second childhood."

Through the help of such universal themes as dementia and Covid-19 Pandemic, McGuinness seems to be interested in how we all make sense of the world and in what can affect our sense of identity. Since the present does not help to make plans for the future, the past must be recollected and our time must be used in order to reconsider the meaning of our own life. We see Father on his own again, as Daughter leaves the stage, with silence pervading the scene, very much like what happens in the ending of *The Hanging Gardens*, reminding us that his/their story can be, is certainly ours, too.

[8] Not accidentally, Daughter will say: "All will happen is what always happens." (McGuinness 2021: 34)

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