Episode Book

EPISODE #5615

Philadelphia, Here I Come: Friel's Split Man on Stage

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SYNOPSIS

Brian Friel's Philadelphia, Here I Come premiered at Dublin's Gaiety Theatre on September 28, 1964, and it put two actors inside one man. Public Gar faces the world; Private Gar says everything his counterpart cannot. This episode unpacks the split-self device, the kitchen scene where a father's only attempt at love is advice about sitting at the back of an airplane, and the speech about loving his son that S.B. O'Donnell delivers to the housekeeper instead. Then we follow the play's reception — from Oscar Lowenstein buying it sight unseen for the West End, to David Merrick's Broadway production and the reviews that split along the same fault line: was Gar's interiority universal, or a novelist's approach in a dramatist's frame?

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Picture a classroom in Cork. Thirty teenage boys, a television on a trolley, and a VHS tape of a play from 1964 that gets played so many times the tracking lines become part of the text.



Herman

The trolley. Every Irish school had the same trolley.



Corn

Daniel went to Presentation Brothers College, Pres in Cork, and one of the great gifts the school bestowed on him was Brian Friel's Philadelphia, Here I Come. The educational method was watching a VHS of a performance far more times than anyone wanted to, until something about what the play meant had been absorbed by sheer repetition. He bonded with his friend Peter Clancy over the absurdity of it, and to this day the two of them send each other Facebook messages that begin with lines from the play.



Herman

That's the detail that gets me. The lines outlived the classroom.



Corn

So Daniel's asking a few things. He remembers the play's mechanism, exploring Gar through a public and a private persona, two actors playing one man. He remembers the tragic story of Irish emigration, the emotionally stilted father who can't bring himself to show emotion at his son's departure, and the one breakthrough moment involving a sturdy leather belt and some advice about where to sit on the aircraft, based on the father's understanding of aviation safety data. He watched it many hours on an old tape, alongside everyone else in that classroom. And he's often wondered what kind of critical reception the play actually enjoyed at the time.



Herman

Which is the question he wants us to take seriously today.



Corn

And then the second half of it. The Irish education system's version of teaching English, at least as he experienced it, had a strange fixation on studying specific works of literature ad nauseum, then grading you on your expositions of them in freestyle essays for the Leaving Certificate. So those who remember what they studied have a mixture of dread at the prospect of ever reading or watching the thing again, and a strange fondness that the process itself produced. He wants us to look at how this play did actually.



Herman

The reception is fascinating, and it's not the story people assume.



Corn

So where do we start?



Herman

With the play itself. Philadelphia, Here I Come premiered at the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin on the twenty-eighth of September, 1964, part of the Dublin International Theatre Festival, directed by Hilton Edwards. Published the following year.



Corn

And the setting.



Herman

Ballybeg. Friel's fictional Donegal town, the one he used across a whole run of plays. The entire action takes place over a single night, the eve of Gareth O'Donnell's departure for Philadelphia. Gar is twenty-five. He works in his widowed father's grocery and dry-goods store. He's leaving a life of routine and predictability, and the play is the last night before he goes.



Corn

And the thing everyone remembers.



Herman

Gar is played by two actors. Public Gar is the man people see and talk to. Private Gar is the unseen man, the man within, the conscience, the alter ego, the secret thoughts, the id. Friel's own staging note is precise about it. Nobody except Public Gar hears Private Gar talk. But even Public Gar, although he talks to Private Gar occasionally, never sees him and never looks at him. One cannot look at one's alter ego.



Herman

It's the whole play in a sentence. And the critics understood what Friel had done. Richard Pine said contemporary Irish drama begins in 1964 with this play. Christopher Murray called Gar an Irish Hamlet for his time, a man longing for contact but driven back repeatedly on himself. Chris Morash argued the device challenged one of the central assumptions of naturalistic theatre and the whole empiricist worldview that supports it.



Corn

Which is a grand way of saying the audience can't trust what they see.



Herman

The audience sees everything. That's the point. You see the composed public face and the screaming private one at the same time, and you understand that everyone you've ever met has that second track running.



Corn

Let's get into the device properly, because it's not just a trick.



Herman

No. It's a solution to a specific dramatic problem. Friel wanted to show a man who cannot say what he feels. If you write that as straight naturalism, you get a character who sits silently for two hours, and the audience learns nothing. The split lets the audience hear the interior monologue while watching the exterior failure.



Corn

So Private Gar says the things Gar can't.



Herman

Private Gar is the id and the conscience at once. He's vicious about Gar's father, he's mocking, he's cruel, he's also the one who's honest. And Public Gar has to stand there and make small talk about the weather while his own alter ego is screaming in his ear about how much he wants his father to say something real.



Corn

The cruelty is interesting. Private Gar isn't a sympathetic inner voice.



Herman

He's not. He calls his father Screwballs. That's the nickname Private Gar uses for S.B. O'Donnell throughout. And there's a line that's the most direct statement of the play's emotional starvation. Screwballs, we've eaten together like this for the past twenty-odd years, and never once in all that time have you made as much as one unpredictable remark.



Corn

Twenty-odd years of meals.



Herman

And the tragedy is that Gar would stay. That's the thing people miss. He's not desperate to leave for the sake of America. He's leaving because nothing here will ever change. If his father said one genuine thing, one unpredictable remark, Gar would unpack.



Corn

The father is described as clench-lipped, word-shy. That's from a TIME review in 1966.



Herman

Which is exactly right. S.B. O'Donnell is a man who has feelings and no mechanism for expressing them. And the play gives him one moment, and it's the moment everybody remembers.



Corn

The kitchen scene.



Herman

Act three, scene two. Neither of them can sleep. The father and son meet in the kitchen in the middle of the night, and S.B. awkwardly advises Gar to sit at the back of the airplane, because it's safest there. That's it. That's the father's one attempt at connection. Practical advice about aviation safety.



Corn

It's devastating precisely because it's so small.



Herman

It's the only language he has. He can't say I'll miss you or I'm afraid for you or I love you. He can say sit at the back, it's safer. And Gar understands what it is, and it still isn't enough, and that's the whole tragedy.



Corn

Now, Daniel's memory of this scene has a detail worth flagging.



Herman

The belt.



Corn

He remembers the father gifting Gar a sturdy leather belt and providing the aviation advice. And the aviation advice is right. The belt is actually given by Gar's friend Ned, as a goodbye present. Two separate gifts that have merged in memory.



Herman

Which is almost too perfect for this episode. He watched the tape so many times that two goodbye scenes fused into one.



Corn

It's a demonstration of the exact phenomenon he's asking about. The memory of a studied text blurs under repetition.



Herman

And here's the thing. His reading of the scene isn't wrong even with the belt misplaced. The father's gesture is the aviation advice. The belt was never the father's. But the emotional logic Daniel remembers, the father who can only express love through practical concern, that's exactly what's on the page.



Corn

So the memory drifted but the interpretation held.



Herman

The interpretation held. That's what eighteen viewings of a VHS will do.



Corn

There's another moment in the play that does the same work as the kitchen scene, and it's the one that lands hardest.



Herman

The father's one long speech.



Corn

And he doesn't give it to Gar.



Herman

He gives it to Madge, the housekeeper. S.B. recalls walking hand-in-hand with Gar on his first day of school. It's the only time in the play he speaks at length about loving his son, and his son isn't in the room.



Corn

That's the cruelty of the construction.



Herman

And Madge's response closes the circle. She says that when S.B. was Gar's age, he was the very same. Leppin' and eejitin' about and actin' the clown. As like as two peas.



Corn

So the father was Gar once.



Herman

The father was Gar. And life stilted him, the same way it's about to stilt Gar if he stays. The play isn't about a cold man. It's about what a place does to men over twenty-odd years of eating together in silence.



Corn

Let's talk about the emigration, because that's the engine underneath all of it.



Herman

Friel set it in the present. 1964. Aer Lingus had only introduced transatlantic flights in 1958, so a young man from Donegal flying to Philadelphia was a new possibility. The play is rooted in a specific moment.



Corn

And the numbers behind that moment are stark.



Herman

The Irish-born population in Britain went from about five hundred and thirty-seven thousand in 1951 to seven hundred and eighty thousand in 1961. Emigration had been a defining feature of Irish life for a century, and it was still running hard when Friel wrote this.



Corn

So Gar isn't a symbol. He's a statistic who got a name.



Herman

And Friel was explicit that the specificity didn't limit it. He said an individual leaving behind him a whole culture is a universal theme. That's the sentence to hold onto, because it's the exact fault line the reviews split along.



Corn

So let's look at how it did.



Herman

The Dublin premiere reception was strong. Hilton Edwards, who directed it, called it intensely human, full of humour, well written and intensely normal. Desmond Rush in the Irish Independent called it far and away the finest new Irish play of this Dublin Theatre Festival and of this year.



Corn

And the commercial reaction was immediate.



Herman

The London impresario Oscar Lowenstein bought it sight unseen for the West End. The BBC bought it for radio adaptation from the script alone. That's a play that people in the trade recognized instantly.



Corn

But not universal praise.



Herman

The Times suggested it lacked the universal quality of John B. Keane's The Year of the Hiker, and said it showed the approach of the novelist rather than the dramatist. That's a real criticism. The play does have a lot of interiority and not a lot of plot.



Corn

And the Sunday Times fired back.



Herman

The best drama is always rooted in the soil from which it springs, and Philadelphia, Here I Come is all Ireland. Which is a lovely line and also a direct rebuttal of the Times' whole premise.



Corn

Then it crossed the Atlantic.



Herman

American premiere in Philadelphia on the seventeenth of January, 1966, which is a nice piece of symmetry, then New York via Boston. Produced by David Merrick, who was the biggest producer on Broadway at the time.



Corn

And the American reviews.



Herman

TIME called it honest, lyrical, unaffected and affecting. And they loved the split-Gar device, described it as a jazzy Greek chorus, a human pep pill, and a court jester.



Corn

Three things at once.



Herman

The same review has a line I want to read properly because it's the best description of the play I've found. Other people speak English; the Irish play it. Philadelphia is not scored for brass, timpani, or full dramatic orchestra, but it exquisitely renders the chamber music of existence.



Corn

That's a review that understood what it was watching.



Herman

The New Yorker was more measured. John McCarten wrote that it burns at least part of the time with an almost gemlike flame, though he thought it wasn't as well fleshed out dramatically as it might be. That's the same criticism the Times made in Dublin. The play's interiority reads as thinness to some critics.



Corn

But the run tells a different story.



Herman

By August 1966 it became the second Irish play to reach two hundred performances on Broadway. The first was Paul Vincent Carroll's Shadow and Substance, which hit two hundred and seventy-five in 1938. Philadelphia broke that record in October 1966.



Corn

So the American audience didn't find it thin.



Herman

The American audience found it. And then London, which is where it gets interesting.



Corn

The Lyric Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue, September 1967.



Herman

Twentieth of September. Mostly warm. Irving Wardle in the Times called it a tender and honest play and a study in the classic Irish theme of delayed manhood. W.A. Darlington in the Daily Telegraph said the split-Gar idea was more than an ingenious stage trick.



Corn

But.



Herman

Philip Hope-Wallace in the Guardian found the device little more than a gimmick, slightly tiresome at times, and called the play pleasant though protracted. And Penelope Mortimer in the Evening Standard went further. She called it a rather woebegone offering with the air of a leprechaun who is very far from home.



Corn

A leprechaun.



Herman

That's the review. That's the register of English criticism of Irish work in that period.



Corn

And that's where the reception history stops being about theatre and starts being about something else.



Herman

It is. Because the Irish critic Mary Holland wrote about it, in Queen and Plays and Players, and she said something that cuts to the bone. She said it's impossible for an Irish viewer like myself to be objective about a play like this. I found it funny, clear eyed, compassionate and almost unbearably true to life.



Corn

Almost unbearably true to life.



Herman

But then she argues it fails by the highest Chekhovian standards to transcend local experience. Parochial none the less. And she notes that an English audience found it sentimental, overworking the commonplace Irishisms.



Corn

So the same play is unbearably true to one audience and sentimental cliché to another.



Herman

And both of them are watching the same performance. That's not a disagreement about quality. That's a disagreement about whether specificity travels.



Corn

Which is the fight Friel anticipated. An individual leaving behind a whole culture is a universal theme.



Herman

He thought the specific was the universal. The English critics thought the specific was the local. And the Irish audience sat in the middle, recognizing their own kitchen on stage and being told by a reviewer from London that it was a stage Irishman.



Corn

That maps onto Daniel's experience exactly.



Herman

It does. Because the Irish audience finds it true, and the exam system makes it compulsory, and those two things together are what produce the dread and the fondness.



Corn

So let's get into the Leaving Cert, because that's the other half of what he's asking.



Herman

The Department of Education prescribes a fixed list of texts for each year's Leaving Cert English exam. Students study one single text plus a comparative course of several texts. Philadelphia, Here I Come has appeared on those lists repeatedly. It was on the draft list for 2022 at Ordinary level. The prescribed list for 2027 was published in February 2025, and the practice continues unchanged.



Corn

And the exam itself.



Herman

Six hours of written papers. And the marking criteria award marks for purpose, cohesiveness, language and mechanics. That's the list. Creativity, analysis and critique are not on it.



Corn

Ellen McCabe made that point in the Irish Times in 2017. She wrote that the strictures of the Leaving Cert compel students to passively absorb and reproduce preprepared analyses of fictional texts. And she had a line about how literary texts are approached with the black-and-white rigidity of basic facts.



Herman

Which is the opposite of what literature is for.



Corn

There's a teacher quoted in that same piece about teaching Macbeth. I'd still be going back to the handout, because for me it's very much they have to have it, they have to learn it, and they have to be able to reproduce it.



Herman

And a student. When we do it in school, I'm just looking at the exam. So I don't really put my own opinion on it.



Corn

That's the whole system in one sentence from a teenager.



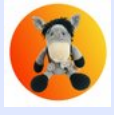
Herman

And here's the paradox that makes it worse. The chief examiner's report in 2014 found students were most successful when they avoided a formulaic approach. And the same report noted that a formulaic approach inhibited independent engagement. So the examiners know the formula is the problem, and the exam structure rewards the formula anyway.



Corn

Because a six-hour paper with thousands of scripts has to be markable.



Herman

It has to be markable, and markable means predictable, and predictable means teachable, and teachable means the handout. The whole chain is rational at every link and produces something nobody defends.



Corn

And what it produces is the thing Daniel described. Dread at the thought of ever reading the book again, and a strange fondness that the process itself created.



Herman

The fondness is real, though. That's the part I find interesting. Nobody's nostalgic for a textbook they crammed. But people are nostalgic for this play.



Corn

Because they watched it.



Herman

Because they watched it eighteen times, and the lines got into them, and now Daniel and Peter Clancy send each other Facebook messages that start with Private Gar's dialogue. The exam took the play and the repetition kept it.



Corn

There's a symmetry here that I don't think is a coincidence.



Herman

Go on.



Corn

The play is about a man with a public self and a private self. The exam asks students to produce a public self, the essay that matches the marking criteria, while the private self sits there with its real reaction. The students were performing the exact split Friel wrote.



Herman

That's the thing. They were asked to analyze a play about the gap between the performed self and the felt self, and the method of analysis required them to perform a self and suppress the felt one.



Corn

Which is why the fondness is strange. It's fondness for a play that understood what was being done to them.



Herman

And the dread is because they had to do it anyway.



Corn

Herman, I want to push on one thing. Is the Leaving Cert actually bad at this, or is it just that any mass exam has to do this?



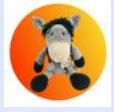
Herman

Any mass exam has to standardize. That's true. But there's a difference between standardizing the assessment and standardizing the interpretation. You could set a question that rewards a student for a genuine reading and still mark it reliably. It's harder. It costs more. But the current structure doesn't just standardize the marking, it standardizes what the correct reading is, and then the handout becomes the text.



Corn

So the play becomes a set of prepared points.



Herman

The play becomes a set of prepared points. And then the student who actually felt something about the kitchen scene has to set that aside and write the answer about the father's emotional reticence as a theme, with three supporting quotations.



Herman

Which they're doing while writing it. It's almost too neat.



Corn

I keep coming back to the memory drift with the belt.



Herman

The belt.



Corn

Daniel remembers the father giving Gar the belt. It was Ned. And he remembers it with total confidence, because he saw it so many times.



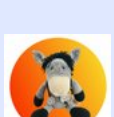
Herman

The confidence is the interesting part. Repetition doesn't just blur a memory, it hardens it. He's more sure of the wrong detail than he'd be of a right one he'd seen once.



Corn

And the wrong detail is more emotionally coherent than the right one. A father giving his son a belt as a goodbye gift fits the story he's telling. Ned giving him a belt is just a friend being a friend.



Herman

So the memory edited the play to make it a better version of itself. Which is what memory does.



Corn

And what the exam does, in a way. It edits the text down to the version that fits the answer.



Herman

The exam edits the text down to the version that fits the answer, and the student remembers the version that fits the answer, and then twenty years later they remember a play they never quite saw.



Corn

Which brings us to the question of what the play actually did, in the end.



Herman

It did what Friel said it would. It traveled. It ran two hundred performances on Broadway and broke a record. It opened in the West End and got warm reviews and one review calling it a leprechaun. It's been on Irish exam lists for decades. It's still being taught.



Corn

The reception at the time was more contested than the fond memory suggests.



Herman

Much more. The Times called it provincial. The Guardian called the device a gimmick. Mary Holland, who loved it, still called it parochial by the highest standards. The consensus that it's a masterpiece came later, and it came mostly from the Irish side of the argument.



Corn

Which is a very Irish thing to happen to a play about Irish people being misunderstood.



Herman

Friel would probably have enjoyed that.



Corn

Let's bring in Hilbert, because I know he's got something on this one.



Hilbert

Seven times.



Corn

Seven times?



Hilbert

I was covering an English class in a secondary school in the west of Ireland. Not Cork. But similar enough. A few weeks, that's all it was. They handed me a tape and said just play it, they'll get it eventually. So I played it seven times over three weeks. By the end I could do Private Gar's lines from memory.



Herman

Did the students get it?



Hilbert

Some of them. One of them asked me why the father couldn't just say I love you. And I had to explain that the father gives him the belt, and that's the father saying it, and the boy just looked at me.



Corn

The belt.



Hilbert

That's the scene. The father can't say it, so he gives him something sturdy, and he tells him where to sit on the plane, and that's the whole man in one gesture. I remember it clearly because I had to explain it four times to four different boys who all asked the same question.



Herman

Hilbert, the belt is actually given by Ned. Gar's friend. The father's gesture is the aviation advice.



Hilbert

No, the father gives him the belt.



Herman

The belt is Ned's.



Hilbert

Well. I explained it as the father's, and the boys understood it as the father's, and it works as the father's. So I'll stand by it.



Corn

You're standing by a misreading.



Hilbert

I'm standing by what made sense in the room. The father gives him the belt, the father tells him where to sit, and the boy who asked the question stopped asking. That's what the scene is for.



Herman

I can't argue with the room.



Hilbert

I still have the tape.



Corn

The VHS.



Hilbert

Borrowed it from the school. Never brought it back. It's in a box somewhere. I haven't watched it since, but I can't bring myself to throw it out.



Herman

You have a physical object from this exact experience.



Hilbert

It's a tape of a play I watched seven times and taught badly to a room of bored teenagers because nobody trained me to teach it. They gave me a tape and a room. That's the system. You don't have to understand the play. You have to press play.



Corn

That's the whole critique, and you got there by describing your job.



Hilbert

I was a substitute. I did what I was told. The tape did the teaching. I just made sure it got to the end.



Herman

The boys who asked the question, the one who wanted to know why the father couldn't say it.



Hilbert

He got it. He got it more than the ones who were taking notes. He just wanted to know why the man couldn't say the thing. And I told him the man gives him the belt instead. Which is true, as far as the room was concerned.



Corn

Hilbert, that's the most useful thing anyone's said about this play all episode.



Hilbert

It's just what happened.



Herman

The system doesn't require understanding. It requires compliance. You press play, the students watch, the exam gets marked, and somewhere in there a boy asks a real question and gets an answer that's slightly wrong but emotionally right, and the tape goes in a box and never comes out.



Corn

That's the dread and the fondness in one object. A borrowed VHS that he can't return and can't throw away.



Herman

The play is about a man who can't say the thing and a father who can't say the thing, and the artifact of how we taught it is a tape nobody can bring themselves to deal with.



Corn

It's almost too neat.



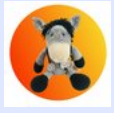
Herman

Friel would have enjoyed that too.



Corn

Here's the thing I keep circling. The play's whole device is the gap between the public self and the private self. And the exam system took that play and asked students to produce a public self about it, while their private self sat there with its actual reaction. The dread is the private self remembering what it had to suppress. The fondness is the private self remembering that it was there at all, that something real happened in that classroom even though the system was designed to prevent it.



Herman

The fondness is the proof that the play beat the exam. Daniel and Peter Clancy sending each other Private Gar lines twenty years later is the play winning. The exam got the marks. The play got the friendship.



Corn

That's the one thing worth taking from this. The system can prescribe the text and standardize the answer and mark the essay, but it can't stop the lines from getting into people. The repetition that was supposed to drill the analysis into them drilled the play in



Corn (continued)

instead.



Herman

The play was always about exactly that. The thing that survives the performance.



Corn

Hilbert, thanks for producing. We'll be back soon.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you've got a text you studied to death and can still quote, tell us about it. Email us at show at my weird prompts dot com.



Corn

See you tomorrow.