

MOLLY SWEENEY

Brian Friel

Directed by Bruce Sevy

October 17 - December 14, 1996

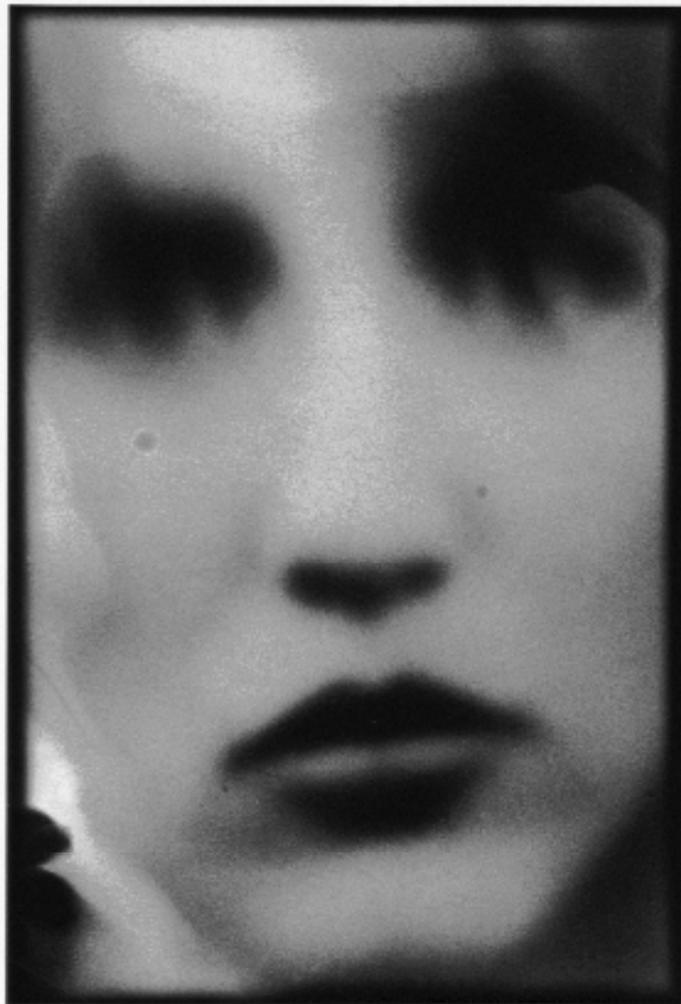


Photo by Gary Isaacs

Play Guide

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SYNOPSIS OF MOLLY SWEENEY

**“The further one goes, the less one knows.
Therefore the sage knows without going about.
Understands without seeing,
And accomplishes without any action.”
~ Lao-Tzu, *The Way of Lao-Tzu***

Molly Sweeney is a three-character play staged to examine three perceptions of the play's events. In Brian Friel's imaginary village of Ballybeg (Irish for little town), the play explores the difference between seeing and knowing, success and failure, and vision and understanding.

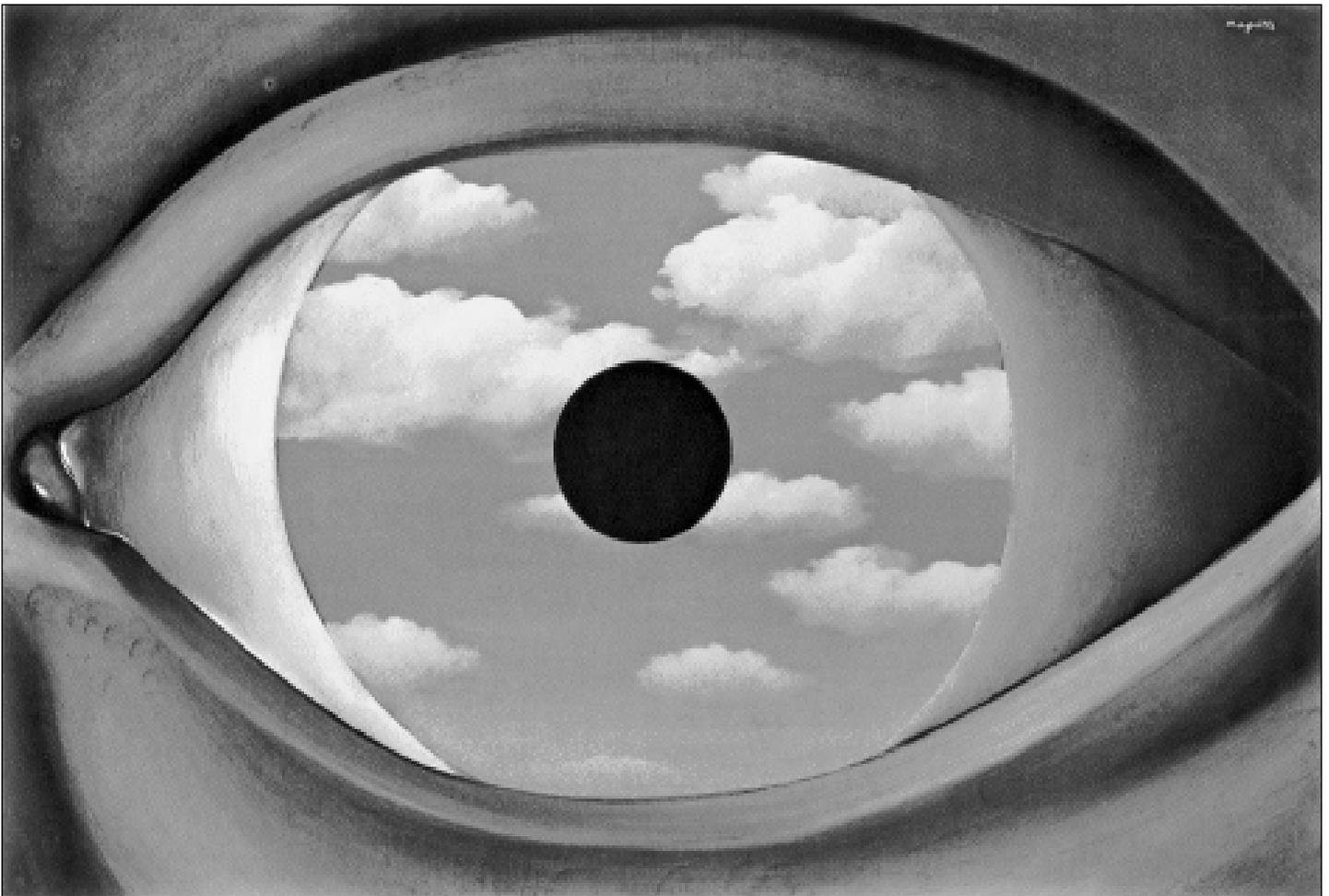
Molly Sweeney is 41, a near-blind physiotherapist (masseuse) who is comfortable with her condition. Through touch, smell, sound and a lifetime of complex associations, she has become no more and no less needy than any sighted person. Her

husband, Frank, is full of football-fanish enthusiasm for worthy causes and bounces through life finding one humane project after another. Restoring Molly's vision has become his latest mission. When he learns that Mr. Rice, a once distinguished ophthalmologist, is in Ballybeg, he is convinced that through surgery and therapy, Molly can be made to see.

Mr. Rice was a brilliant doctor, but he has fallen on hard times; he is in Ballybeg after career-destroying years of drinking and depression sparked by a long-ago romantic betrayal. Just as Frank views Molly's operation as his cause, so does the doctor have his own use for the woman's condition: It is his redemption, his last chance to restore a once dazzling reputation.

Frank and Mr. Rice may appear manipulators, but both are genuinely enchanted by this sightless woman. Each “sees” Molly's situation from his own limited perspective and personal need as they attempt to impose their sighted world on her.

**“As Lightning to the children eased
With explanation kind,
The truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind.—”**



The False Mirror, René Magritte. 1928.

BRIAN FRIEL

**“An Irishman’s imagination never lets him alone,
never convinces him, never satisfies him;
but it makes him that he can’t face reality,
nor deal with it nor handle it nor conquer it.”
~ G. B. Shaw. *John Bull’s Other Island*.**

Since 1980, Brian Friel’s plays have been virtually guaranteed an international audience. Productions at the Royal National Theatre have been the rule rather than the exception; and in 1980, off-Broadway productions of Friel plays occurred regularly and attracted the attention of leading critics. In 1991, *Dancing at Lughnasa* opened on Broadway to critical acclaim and won four Tony Awards. Meanwhile, regional company seasons in the United States have come to seem almost incomplete without the production of a Friel play. His works have attracted academic attention. At the present time, the question is whether he is “Ireland’s current master dramatist” or “one of the best playwrights in the world.”

Friel was born in Omagh in County Tyrone in 1929, the son of a primary school principal. That same year the family went to live in the Bogside in Derry. He spent five years at St. Columb’s College in Derry and later two-and-a-half years at St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth, the national seminary near Dublin. Instead of going on to the priesthood, he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree and spent a year at St. Joseph’s Teacher Training College in Belfast. From 1950-1960 he taught in various schools around Derry and began writing part-time, mainly short stories, that were published in *The New Yorker* magazine. In 1960, he retired from teaching to work full-time as a writer. In 1964, he found success in London and New York with his play, *Philadelphia, Here I Come*.

In each decade Friel’s plays have examined different themes, ideas and even dramatic structures. In the 1960s, his plays dismantled a unified subject and threw it into confusion and contradiction. Basically, the playwright was looking at the transformation taking place in Irish cultural life arising out of the tensions between tradition and modernity. The idea of a united Ireland, both economically and socially, fell apart in the late 1950s and early 60s. Friel’s main characters in such plays as *Philadelphia Here I Come*, *The Enemy Within*, *The Loves of Cass McGuire* and *Fox and Crystal* have dark, subversive sides that refuse to be bound by social convention; they have a sort of “split personality” much like Ireland itself.

In 1968, the society Friel had known all his life began to break down as Northern Ireland entered its long, slow disintegration. Police and army, guerrillas and assassins, bombers and torturers suddenly became prominent and transformed Friel’s writing. All the plays of this decade have an interest in the disintegration of traditional authority and in the exposure of the violence upon which

it rested. *The Freedom of the City* and *Volunteers* deal with civil rights marchers or prisoners; *Living Quarters* and *Aristocrats* are studies in the breakdown of a family in the small-town setting of Ballybeg. In *The Faith Healer*, Friel challenged traditional dramatic structure. The play is composed of four monologues, the first and last by Frank Hardy, the faith healer, the second and third spoken by Grace, his wife, and Teddy, his manager. It closely resembles *Molly Sweeney* in its form and idea, as an examination of an event from different points of view.

In the 1980s, Friel and Stephen Rhea, the Belfast actor, founded the Field Day Theatre Co. Field Day set out to “contribute to the solution of the present crisis (in Ireland) by producing analyses of the established opinions, myths and stereotypes that had become both a symptom and a cause of the current situation.”²² In the plays of this decade, Friel explores new ways of looking at things, including Ireland, and of finding new truths. *Translations*, *The Communication Cord*, *Making History* all examine the relativity of truth.

In the plays of the 90s, Friel has demonstrated mixed feelings about words; he shows an increasing interest in non-verbal communication and in the hidden landscapes of the mind. This mode reached a kind of culmination in *Dancing at Lughnasa* as the powerful dance scene dealt with emotions at gut level. In both *London Vertigo* and *Molly Sweeney*, Friel again presents alternative views of character and situation, while dealing with the unconscious versus the “real.”

The kind of art in which Friel specializes consistently acknowledges doubt, uncertainty and confusion; he wants to achieve a comprehensive, inclusive vision that takes into account as much life of as it can. To Friel, art is viewed as a constant process of “defamiliarization” of the ordinary. Friel’s is a drama of “rewriting” communal, national and cultural origins and it is this dynamic that enables it to speak to other nations and cultures. Finally, the dramatist’s constant search is hope, the guarantee of a future. He disturbs us with “terrible, taunting questions,”²³ but wants us to realize that even in confusion and disillusion, strength and courage can exist and out of these can come a renewal of the human spirit.

**“Confusion is not an ignoble condition.”
~ Brian Friel. *Translations***

VIRGIL

(The story behind *Molly Sweeney*)

“Defects, disorders, diseases—can play a paradoxical role, by bringing out latent powers, developments, evolutions, forms of life, that might never be seen, or even be imaginable, in their absence.”

~ Oliver Sacks, p. xvi

~ Emily Dickinson

The play *Molly Sweeney* is based upon a story, “To See or Not to See” by Oliver Sacks. The story, which first appeared in *The New Yorker*, is one of seven paradoxical tales in Sacks’ book, *An Anthropologist on Mars*.

Virgil was a passive, 50-year-old man who had been virtually blind since childhood. When he was three, he became gravely ill with meningitis, polio and cat-scratch fever. The illnesses left him partially paralyzed and blind; though he regained use of his legs, his vision did not improve significantly. When he was six, he was sent to a school for the blind in Kentucky where he learned to read Braille and became adept at using a cane. When he graduated, Virgil left Kentucky for a city in Oklahoma. There he trained as a massage therapist and was employed by a YMCA; he took pride in his work and had a passion for sports, especially baseball, and liked to listen to the games on radio. His knowledge of players, scores, and statistics was almost encyclopedic.

In 1991, he met Amy. From a cultivated middle-class family, Amy had come out of college and graduate school with a degree in botany. Though she was asthmatic and diabetic, she had been a swimming coach and had run her own plant nursery. When she and Virgil began dating, he could distinguish between light and dark and could see the shadow of a hand moving in front of his face. Amy regarded Virgil as stuck in a vegetative, dull life; she felt that restoring his sight, like marriage, would “stir him from his indolent bachelor existence and provide them both with a new life.”⁴

Virgil was, as usual, passive, but Amy persuaded him to see her own ophthalmologist, Dr. Scott Hamlin. He saw that Virgil had thick cataracts, but he was not sure that he had retinitis pigmentosa, a hereditary disease that slowly destroys the retinas. Dr. Hamlin performed the surgery, the cataracts were removed and Virgil could “see.” But could he really? To Virgil, there was light, movement and color, all mixed up and meaningless. Only when the surgeon spoke did Virgil realize this chaos of light and shadow was a face—the face of his surgeon.

Sacks writes: “When we open our eyes each morning it is upon a world we have spent a lifetime learning to see. We are not given the world: we make our world through incessant experience, categorization, memory, reconnections. But when Virgil opened his eyes, there were no visual memories to support a perception; there was no world of experience and meaning awaiting him. He saw, but what he saw had no coherence.”⁵

Virgil was able to see colors and movements, to see (but not identify) large objects and shapes, and to read some letters on the third line of the Snellen eye chart; but his central vision was poor

because the macular (center) part of the retina was scarcely functioning; therefore, his eyes could not fixate on targets for long. When Dr. Sacks came to visit him, he found Virgil (now married to Amy) to be an overweight, unwell man. “His behavior was not that of a sighted man, but it was not that of a blind man, either. It was rather the behavior of one mentally blind, or agnostic—able to see but not to decipher what he was seeing.”⁶

Sacks observed Virgil in his new world of sight; some things he could identify, others not. Still Virgil persevered and learned steadfastly for a while. After the operation, Virgil liked to buy toy soldiers, toy cars, toy animals, etc. It seemed as if through touching these at the same time that he looked at them, he could forge a crucial correlation—a visual engram, if you will. He could prepare himself to see the real world by learning first to see this toy world.

Virgil was doing his utmost to live life as a sighted man, but the successes achieved seemed to come at great psychological cost. Then the catastrophe came in February, 1993. Virgil collapsed and was admitted to the hospital with lobar pneumonia. He was in respiratory failure; the level of oxygen in his blood dropped and carbon dioxide began to rise. With his brain deprived of oxygen and poisoned by carbon dioxide, Virgil’s consciousness fluctuated, and on bad days, he could see nothing. As he recuperated, he would say he saw nothing, but would reach for objects, avoid obstacles and behave as if he saw. This condition—called implicit sight or blindsight—occurs if the visual parts of the cerebral cortex are knocked out (by lack of oxygen, for example), but the visual centers remain intact. Visual signals are perceived and responded to, but nothing of this perception reaches consciousness at all.

When Virgil left the hospital, it was as a respiratory cripple. Tethered to an oxygen tank, he could not work, so he lost his job and his home. The “miraculous” restoration of sight to a blind man ended with a bizarre and ironic twist. Virgil had tried, but the problems, the conflicts of seeing, but not seeing, not being able to make a visual world and at the same time being forced to give up his own world of darkness, were too much. “But now, paradoxically, a release was given—in the form—of a blindness he received as a gift. Now, at last, Virgil is allowed not to see, allowed to escape from the glaring, confusing world—and to return to his own true being, the intimate concentrated world of the other senses that had been his home for almost fifty years.”⁷

**“Hello. darkness, my old friend
I’ve come to talk with you again.”**

~ Paul Simon. “The Sound of Silence.” 1964.

ATTITUDES TOWARD BLINDNESS IN LITERATURE

“None so blind as those who will not see.”

~ Matthew Henry. *Commentaries*. Jeremiah 20.

In Greek literature blindness is considered the worst of misfortunes. When Oedipus blinds himself in Sophocles' play, the chorus expresses this idea when it says—“for thou wert better dead than living and blind.”⁹ In *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, Edward Rochester, the heroine's beloved who has been blinded in a fire, is described by his ex-butler:—“he is alive, but many think he had better be dead.”¹⁰ Dick Helder, the blind hero of Kipling's *The Light that Failed*, seems to function well, yet curses his best friend because he is alive and can see, while “he, Dick, was dead in the death of the blind.”¹¹

The idea that blind people live in a world of darkness is expressed by the blind poet, John Milton, in his “Samson Agonistes” (1671). Samson says:

**“O dark, dark, dark amid the blaze of noon,
Irrevocably dark, total eclipse
Without all hope of day.”¹²**

In Victor Hugo's *The Man who Laughs*, Gwynplaine, the facially deformed protagonist, and Dea, his blind companion, are characterized as “having veils over them, like the night.”¹³

The idea that the blind are helpless is expressed in the Bible in Deuteronomy (28: 28-29). “May the Lord strike you with—blindness—so that you will grope around in broad daylight—and fail to find your way.” Milton, too, considered his uselessness when he wrote his 16th sonnet:

**“When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide,
Lodg'd with me useless.”**

Milton's actual life after his blindness contradicted his feelings. He was quite active and wrote much of his greatest poetry after becoming blind.

The concept that blind people are useless is closely related to helplessness. For example, since he blinds himself, Oedipus has done nothing but wander around and seems to have no contact with the world except through Antigone. On the other hand, some writers see the blind as useful if they are able to function. When the Cyclops Polyphemus is blinded by Odysseus, he is still able to throw huge rocks at Odysseus' ship and nearly destroy it. Wolf Larson, in Jack London's *The Sea Wolf* (1904) is still feared after he becomes blind.

The notion that the loss of sight is often compensated by other gifts is illustrated by the Greek poet, Homer, whose gift of poetry was considered to be of divine origin. Tiresias, the blind soothsayer in *Oedipus* had a gift of prophecy that was viewed as godlike. However, blindness can also be viewed as punishment for sin. Oedipus, though his blindness was self-inflicted, was being punished for the crimes of patricide and incest. In Genesis (19:9-11), the Sodomites who come to arrest Lot are blinded by angels and Lot escapes. Gloucester in Shakespeare's *King Lear* is blind as a retribution for his adultery, while John Milton's enemies saw his blindness as punishment for his political views.

Sightless individuals have also been viewed as mysterious and, as such, idealized. Bulwer-Lytton in *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1854) creates the blind character Nydia who is sweet, pure, noble and self-sacrificing. In H. G. Wells' story *The Country of the Blind* (1904), all the inhabitants of a Peruvian village are without sight, but have adapted their existence to their condition. They are self-sufficient and reasonably well-off, and because they are isolated, are not affected by the attitudes of others.

In 1940, the National Federation of the Blind was founded in the United States, and with its formation, came a new way of thinking about blindness. The Federation believes that blind people are essentially normal and that blindness is not a mental or psychological handicap, but is instead a physical nuisance. Therefore, legal, economic and social discrimination must be abolished and equality of opportunity made available to the blind.¹⁴ Theatre has reflected these views in such works as *Butterflies are Free* by Leonard Gershe. Don Baker, the sightless hero, is bright, independent, good-natured, witty and artistic and proves he can live alone in New York City without the aid of his smothering mother. In *Wait Until Dark*, the blind heroine/victim outwits the murderer; in *The Miracle Worker*, the nearly blind Annie Sullivan perseveres with determination, grit and sheer physical will until her blind, deaf and dumb pupil, Helen Keller, can speak. In movies, the Colonel of *Scent of a Woman* may be plotting his own suicide, but he goes about it with wit, sophistication and humor. When challenged by the prankster-influenced plight of his prep school companion, he rises to the occasion and uses his talents to defend and save his buddy. His final “Hoo-Ha” is an exaltation of life, even with its limitations.

**“Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found
Was blind but now I see.”
John Newton. *Olney Hymns*. 1779.**



Helen Keller, deaf and blind since birth, was educated with great skill and patience by her companion for 50 years, Miss Anne Sullivan.

Keller devoted her life to lecturing and writing in the service of and for the inspiration of the blind.

Notes

1. O'Brien, p. 1.
2. Andrews, p.164.
3. Andrews, p. 6.
4. Sacks, p. 113.
5. Sacks, p.114.
6. Sacks, p. 117.
7. Sacks, p. 152.
8. Monbeck, p. 28.
9. Sophocles, *Oedipus, the King*, line 1360.
10. Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, p. 443.
11. Rudyard Kipling, *The Light that Failed*, p. 227.
12. John Milton, "Samson Agonistes," lines 88-82,98-99, 151-54.
13. Victor Hugo, *The Man who Laughs*. Vol. I, p.209-10.
14. Matson, p. 1040.

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