

Intimate and tender tale of love and lingo

TRANSLATIONS

NATIONAL THEATRE

★★★★☆

Brian Friel's exquisite play gets a gorgeous revival from Ian Rickson, emphasising how its thoughtful treatment of language – in both subject and form – illuminates profound questions about nationality, identity, heritage and connection.

In 1830s rural Ireland, Hugh and son Manus run a Gaelic-speaking 'hedge school', where Ancient Greek and Latin are taught, not English.

But Hugh's other son Owen returns with British soldiers in tow, on a mission to map the land – and Anglicise its place names.

Alongside this intricate plot, fraught with colonial undertones



and the clash of tradition and progress, is a star-crossed romance between local girl Maire – tentative sweetheart of Manus, but eyeing passage to America – and newcomer Lieutenant Yolland.

Friel's inspired text is all in English, but represents Gaelic as well. It's gently comic, and an apt metaphor, to see everyone speaking the same words yet not understanding one another, and



Ciaran Hinds (left) Adetomiwa Edun, Colin Morgan and Seamus O'Hara in Translations at The National Theatre pictures: Catherine Ashmore

also presages the domination of English.

For the lovers, difference is seductive, and both circle around the binding word "always".

But their Eden – which begins with new birth, sun and plenty – soon turns to a stormy battlefield, talk of famine, and a climactic image foreshadowing militancy. Now, both North Ireland's current conflicts and Brexit border battles add resonance.

A pitch-perfect ensemble is confidently led by Colin Morgan as the opportunistic Owen, who has a foot in both worlds – but whose identity is murky, with the soldiers mistakenly calling him "Roland".

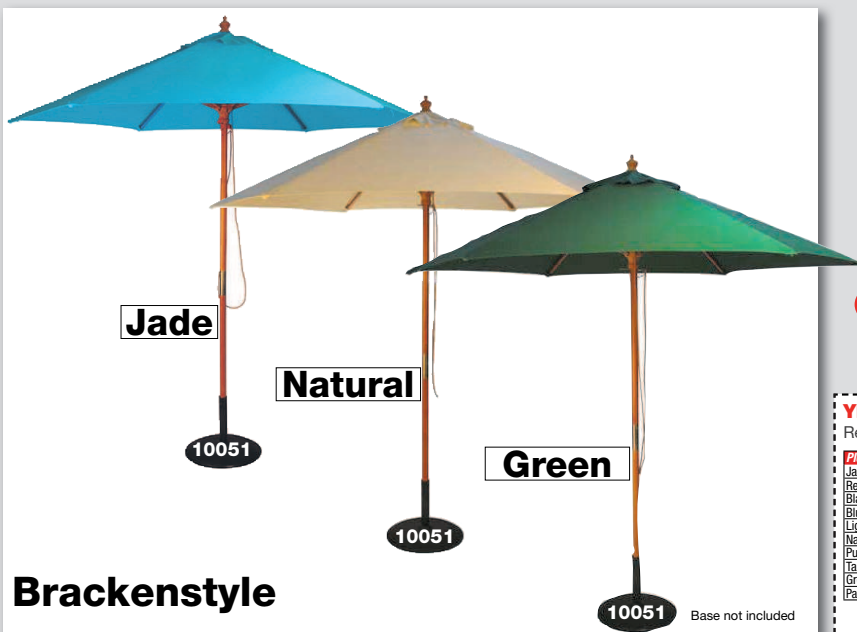
Seamus O'Hara is excellent as the furiously perceptive Manus, Adetomiwa Edun and Judith Roddy endearing as the lovers, giddy with possibilities, and Ciarán Hinds a commanding

patriarch, yet poignant as he romanticises a fading past.

Rae Smith's detailed, loamy set – invaded by bright-red uniforms – and Neil Austin's elemental lighting are superb. A tender, intimate and wondrous epic.

Marianka Swain

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