

# Dancing at Lughnasa (1998)



**Director:** Pat O'Connor  
**Produced by:** Gerrit Folsom (line producer), Jane Barclay (executive producer), Sharon Harel, Noel Pearson (producer), Rod Stoneman (executive producer) - Bórd Scannán na hÉireann/The Irish Film Board  
**Written by:** Brian Friel (play), Frank McGuinness (screenplay)  
**Narrated by:** Gerard McSorley  
**Starring:** Meryl Streep, Michael Gambon, Catherine McCormack, Kathy Burke, Sophie Thompson, Brid Brennan, Rhys Ifans, Lorcan Cranitch, John Kavanagh, Marie Mullen  
**Distributed by:** Sony Pictures Classics  
**Release date(s):** November 13, 1998  
**Running time:** 95 minutes  
**Country:** Ireland, United Kingdom, United States  
**Language:** English

*Dancing at Lughnasa* is an example of a movie that's *less than* the sum of its parts, and, even considering that, it's not a terrible film, just a lethargic one. The elements are all in place for a powerful motion picture: a fine cast, striking photography, and a well-respected play as source material. But the pieces don't fit properly, and the result is a picturesque, technically-adept movie that fails to strike an emotional chord.

The film is an adaptation of a play by Brian Friel; it's not so much an expansion upon the theatrical piece as a complete reworking of it. The movie's story is based on that of the stage version, but the changes are significant. Obviously, something got lost in the translation, and that "something" is empathy. We don't feel for these characters. We watch them struggle through their daily lives from a perspective of almost clinical detachment. In the way it distances viewers, *Dancing at Lughnasa* could almost be considered an "anti-melodrama."

The film is the simple tale of the summer in the life of the Mundy sisters: Kate (Meryl Streep), a bitter and repressed school teacher who believes that "a woman's modesty is everything"; Maggie (Kathy Burke), an uncomely freespirt; Rose (Sophie Thompson), a romantic simpleton; Agnes (Brid Brennan), Rose's quiet keeper; and Christina (Catherine McCormack), an unwed mother. Then there's Michael (Darrell Johnston), Christina's illegitimate son, from whose point-of-view the story is presented in flashback (complete with voiceover narrative). It's 1936 in the small village of Ballybeg, Ireland, and the five spinsters are welcoming home their older brother, Father Jack (Michael Gambon), who is returning from missionary duties in Uganda. Debilitated by his experiences and no longer bound by the conventions of his Christian faith, Jack is only a shell of the man he once was. And, just around the time Jack is settling in, Michael's father, the roguish Gerry (Rhys Ifans), makes one of his infrequent visits, brightening Christina's days, but causing Kate to glower in suspicion.

Although director Pat O'Connor ([Circle of Friends](#)) may have failed to connect with the audience, he has no trouble culling top-notch performances from his actors. Meryl Streep, who seems capable of mastering any accent, slips seamlessly into an otherwise non-American cast, and brings a sense of yearning to her rigidly uptight character. Catherine McCormack ([Dangerous Beauty](#)) allows herself to be de-glamorized for the part of Christina; her beauty is there, but dulled. The other three actresses, although not as prominently featured, are equally as good, and Michael Gambon offers a subdued portrayal of a man who spends most of his days trapped between childlike innocence and muddled memories.

Throughout the whole of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, nothing momentous happens. O'Connor's film explores the subtle rhythms of everyday life and how small events create equally small changes in relationships. We're shown the sisters engaging in such mundane events as knitting gloves and sweaters, feeding chickens, picking blackberries, and taking walks. They spend a lot of time reminiscing about the past, arguing about the present, and fantasizing about the future. Through all of this, none of the characters is satisfactorily developed. We are presented with hints about each of them, but the lack of any in-depth examination is frustrating. We understand how they relate to one another, and what their pecking order in the household is, but the veil hiding their inner selves is rarely pulled aside. The movie almost feels like a prologue or an overview - the actual text is missing.

With the notable exception of one key scene (an exuberant dance sequence when the five sisters drop their inhibitions for the simple pleasure of a spontaneous moment), watching *Dancing at Lughnasa* is an uninvolved experience. The pace is slow and stately - some viewers may be hypnotized, but most will be bored. Nevertheless, if you're in the mood for this kind of motion picture, it offers a few small pleasures, not the least of which is the acting. Overall, though, *Dancing at Lughnasa* fails to live up to the reputation of the Tony award winning play that spawned it.