

# DANCING AT LUGHNASA (1998)

*From the February 1999 Visual Parables.*

Rated PG. Running time: 1 hour 35 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 1; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 3

Our star rating (1-5): 5

Praise the Lord!...

Praise him with trumpet sound;

praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with tambourine and  
dance

Psalm 150:1-4

Dance, then, wherever you may be,

I am the Lord of the Dance said He...

From Sidney Carter's "Lord of the Dance"

Set in Ireland in 1936, the story is told years later by Michael. It was the summer when everything began to change for him and his mother and her four sisters. His mother Christina Mundy was the prettiest of the five sisters. None of the Mundy women were married, due to the scarcity of eligible men. Michael was conceived amidst a passionate affair, but his father had the wanderlust and had left the area. Although Christina had scandalized her sisters by the out-of-wedlock birth, especially Kate (Meryl Streep), the eldest, all doted on the boy.

Kate is the nominal ruler of her five sisters, all living in the same cottage. They live a hand-to-mouth existence, growing

their own vegetables and knitting clothes from locally produced wool. But there are disturbing rumors that a knitting mill is to open soon. Kate teaches at the church school, but enrollment keeps declining, threatening her job. She is good-hearted but often her rigid morality spoils the fun of the others, a case in point being their desire to attend an upcoming dance. Maggie (Kathy Burke) is the liveliest of the five, Agnes the most to be counted on to keep things going in a crisis, and Rose is a bit slow of mind. She is carrying on a secret affair with a local married man.

They all eagerly await the return of their brother Jack from Africa, where for years he had been a missionary priest. But, when he steps off the train, they see that he is a disturbed, broken man. It seems that the Africans had done more converting of him than he of them. Not always certain of what is going on, he is a far more gentler man, we see, than when he served as a priest. Ironically, the paganized Jack is far more grace-filled than he ever was as a priest. Indeed, a sub theme of the story is the contrast between law and grace, Kate and the dour parish

priest being the law in all its rigid, humorless form.

During the course of the summer Gerry, Christina's lover, roars up on his motorbike to spend some time with her and Michael. He wins the affection of the boy, and regains that of Christina. But he cannot stay beyond the summer, he tells her, for he has signed up to fight the Fascists in Spain. He apparently has come to a decision to make his life count for something. In the meantime, Rose sneaks off to join her lover in the harvest dance in the hills. Paganism still thrives there, with the locals paying homage to Lugh the god of light and music. The dance proves too much for Rose, its wild rites loosening the darker passions in her lover and the other revelers. She rushes away from the bonfire and is finally found the next morning by her sisters who are anxiously searching for her.

The set piece of the play, lovingly caught by the camera in subjective and objective shots, is a dance—very different in spirit from the pagan one Rose had gone off to. A beautiful Irish dance tune comes over their radio, arousing Maggie's irrepressible spirit. Rose joins her, then Agnes, followed by Christina, and finally even Kate. They move out into the yard, the music rising in volume, the women in passionate abandonment dancing in a circle, weaving in and around each other. Jack watches with wide-eyed wonder, and is soon joined by Gerry and Michael.

For a moment the sisters forget their many cares—Kate has been unceremoniously let go at school, the woolen mill has opened, taking away their livelihood, Rose and Christina are heartbroken over their romantic affairs—as they are joined together in a dynamic circle love and grace. It will prove to be the high point of their lives, Michael tells us, a darker fate soon to overtake several of them. The dance ends only when the song on the radio stops. The sisters stand in silence, physically exhausted, yet spiritually charged. It was, Michael relates, as if the dance had transported them all, participants and watchers, into a realm where language no longer existed because words were no longer necessary.

Based on Brian Friel's internationally acclaimed play, this is a film that both disturbs and inspires the viewer. It joins my list of 1998's Ten Best.

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