

The Arts

Pagan spirit drives this dance of life

THEATRE

Dancing at Lughnasa

Greenwich Theatre

Rachel Halliburton

A PRECARIOUS transplant operation has been performed on this story of Irish village life in the 1930s, which was first produced within the no-room-to-swing-a-cat confines of the charming Watermill Theatre, Newbury, and now comes to the far more spacious Greenwich Theatre. Such radically different spaces demand different registers of gesture, voice level, and character projection, making it a huge gamble for actors to effect the transition between one venue and another.

Initially, it seems that Jonathan Munby's production has fallen prey to the pitfalls of such a transfer. For the first 10 minutes, the acting feels too loud and declamatory to capture the wistful cadences of Brian Friel's gossamer-fine ode to hope, memory, and fantasy in a place called Ballybeg, where five women pass the time by dancing and dreaming the drabness of their existence away.

Luckily, the spirit of this extraordinary play starts to grab hold

of the auditorium as the women are bewitched by the Irish music blaring from a radio, and whirl wildly round the kitchen, letting out banshee-like howls. Friel is fascinated by the point at which the irrational takes over the rational in the most ordinary of existences, so that music and pagan ritual prove irresistible, almost sexual, forces for working-class spinsters with little else to love.

A deep blue sky and bundles of yellow corn evoke an idyllic countryside on Mike Britton's set. As the cast relaxes, the performances glow into life, so that the audience increasingly becomes entwined in such subtle narrative threads as the romantic hopes of Chris, played with elegant vulnerability by Aoife McMahon, or the teasing humour of Caroline Lennon's superb Maggie.

As the play is dedicated to those "five brave Glenties women", it is perhaps right that the female actors easily outshine the three men — even Peter Dineen's Uncle Jack — whose tales of rituals in Africa reek of the same Bacchanalian wildness that possesses the women when they dance. Their characters' abandon is made all the more poignant by the fact that it is simultaneously a struggle for survival.

● *Until 21 September. Box office: 020 8858 7755.*