

## The Guardian:

### Doonreagan: Ted Hughes and Assia Wevill's escape to Ireland

He started work on his greatest verse cycle; she painted, wrote and danced. Laura Barnett reports on a new play trying to uncover the truth about the relationship between the poet and his married lover



**Our Ireland story ... Assia Wevill with Ted Hughes and Frieda, Hughes's daughter with Sylvia Plath. Photograph: Patricia Mendelson and Celia Chaikin**

Doonreagan House stands on the curve of Cashel Bay in Connemara, on Ireland's remote west coast. It is a handsome, whitewashed building, its wide front windows looking out over the Atlantic. Behind it, under a wide summer sky, looms a high outcrop of rock and peat, wild as the miles of mountain and moorland that separate the village of Cashel from the nearest town.

It was here, in February 1966, that Ted Hughes arrived with his married lover, Assia Wevill, and three children: Frieda and Nicholas, Hughes's children with Sylvia Plath, who had taken her own life in 1963; and Shura, his daughter with Wevill. It was a self-imposed exile – a chance for Hughes to write, and for he and Wevill to seek a level of domestic normality that had eluded them since they'd begun their affair four years before.

They would stay at Doonreagan for just a few months, but these would be some of their happiest together: Hughes began working on his acclaimed verse cycle *Crow*, while Wevill wrote and painted, and Frieda attended the village school. Decades later, Hughes would claim that his time in Ireland was one of the most productive periods of his writing life: not least because here, miles from London, he felt far from the corrosive gossip that had dogged him since Plath's death. Here, too, he and Wevill could live in privacy. Almost none of their friends and family knew she was here.

Now, their time at Doonreagan – or a version of it – is to be retold in a play written by the Swedish author, translator and playwright Ann Henning Jocelyn, which has its premiere next week at London's Jermyn Street theatre. It is a remarkable event for several reasons: because it sheds light on a period of Hughes's life about which, until recently, very little was known; and because Henning Jocelyn is, with her husband, Robert, the current owner of Doonreagan House. She has even shipped furniture to London for the set – including the desk, retained by Robert since he acquired the house in the late 1960s, shortly after Hughes and Wevill's departure – that Hughes may well have sat at to write.

Henning Jocelyn and her husband only discovered the Hughes connection in 2005, when they received some unexpected visitors. "We noticed this little hire car come up the drive," she tells me as we sit in the house's sunlit conservatory. "A couple came out and said they were writing a biography of an Israeli woman called Assia Wevill. They explained that she had been living here with Ted Hughes, and they had found the address of the house on letters written at the time. It was a complete surprise." The couple in the car were Yehuda Koren and Eilat Negev, who published their groundbreaking biography of Wevill, *A Lover of Unreason*, in 2006. Intrigued, Henning Jocelyn began to delve deeper: she read everything she could about Hughes, Plath and Wevill, and interviewed the poet Richard Murphy and the painter Barrie Cooke, two of the few friends who had known both Hughes and Wevill were here; and Seamus Heaney, who also knew the couple. "Heaney said [Wevill] was very striking," she says. "She loved dancing, and she would challenge them a bit. The more I learned about Assia, the more I could identify with her. I had also been a young foreign lady in London – and it is not easy to have no family and no connections, and no friends to back you up."

At first, Henning Jocelyn was intending to turn her research into an academic lecture, aimed at Hughes scholars – but last year, with the characters still looming large in her mind, she decided to transform the material into a play. The result is a one-act piece, *Doonreagan*, in which we see Hughes and Wevill trying to establish a new intimacy while the shadow of Plath's death – and our own knowledge of the tragic fate awaiting Wevill and her daughter – looms large.

Some incidents are based on fact – Hughes's dreams about salmon and pike, which he recounted in his letters (and, obliquely, in his poetry); Wevill's own writing – she was an accomplished, if diffident, poet in her own right, and had abandoned a successful career as a copywriter for the move to Ireland.



Doonreagan House, where Ted Hughes spent a few months with his lover Assia Wevill in 1966

But their conversations are the product of Henning Jocelyn's imagination. Her aim is to round out a picture of two people to whom so much negative rumour and supposition still cling – Hughes for the fact that two of the women closest to him committed suicide; Wevill for being a possible catalyst for Plath's death (Plath had found out about the affair a few months before she ended her life).

"People judge Ted," Henning Jocelyn explains, "based on what happened to him. There's a suggestion that the fate of these two women didn't really bother him at all – that he just said, 'Well, too bad, now where can I find my next girlfriend?' But I don't think it was like that at all. Hopefully the play will lead to a more nuanced understanding of him, and what he went through." Henning Jocelyn has been in contact with Hughes's daughter Frieda about the play, and says she has been encouraging about this approach.

Above all, though, Henning Jocelyn is intrigued by the fact that it was here, in this remote Irish house, that Hughes was able to reignite his creativity after some very dark years. She can understand how Doonreagan House came to have such a profound effect on him: she herself arrived in the summer of 1982 to write a book, and never left. "I had the sense," she says, "that I was coming home. Knowing that Hughes felt the same about this house has only reinforced it. Now, I'm even more aware of how lucky we are to be here."

## **From Reviews of Doonreagan:**

### **The Public Reviews:**

The world premiere of Ann Henning Jocelyn's new play, directed by Alex Dmitriev, takes shape at Jermyn Street Theatre. Doonreagan explores the nature of the relationship between poet Ted Hughes and his married lover Assia Wevill during their brief stay in Connemara, Ireland, at Doonreagan house in 1966.

The play focuses on the couple's effort to establish a contented family setup and

peace, free from the haunting presence of Sylvia Plath after her suicide three years earlier, and to live a life of freedom, far from gossip, prying eyes and the judgement of others. A seemingly happy spell in both their lives, they discovered that, close to nature, they came closer to each other. For Hughes, this translated into a very productive time poetically.

Ann Henning Jocelyn, the long-time owner of Doonreagan house, is less concerned with writing a fictional narrative, and more with dramatising the effects an environment can have on the individual. Video Designer Rebecca Salvadori creates a sense of the environmental landscape via a projector-style screen on the back wall of the theatre, overlooking recreated interiors of the Doonreagan house. The scene on the projector screen changes to mark the passing of time and the changing landscape. Sounds play out overhead to mark the changing situations, whether it be the crying/laughing of one of the unseen children (Ted and Assia were accompanied by Ted's two children with Sylvia and his only child with Assia), or the lapping of water against the rocks (the house is situated on the curve of Cashel Bay), and the opening moments of the play, where a rough driveway is depicted on the screen and the sound of 'It's a long way to Connemara' is sung overhead as the family arrive at the house ahead of their stay.

Another aspect of interest to those with continued curiosity in the Hughes-Plath-Wevill saga will be the set furniture. Furniture used for the set – including a writing desk and leather-bound sofa – is from Doonreagan House in the late 1960s (the start of Jocelyn's association) and would have been used by Ted and Assia during their stay.

Jocelyn's dialogue is subtle, empathetic, and sensitive. She is especially sympathetic to the emotional troubles of Wevill – a woman, lover, and parent still trying to reconcile herself with the death of Sylvia and the effect the latter's suicide had on Hughes, herself, and their ongoing relationship and newly-formed family. Daniel Simpson's Ted Hughes is well-captured, and shines as the late Poet Laureate.

Towards the end of his life, in private letters to close associates, Hughes recollected that his time spent at Doonreagan had been a watershed, a new beginning in his writing and in his personal life. The landscape of the Connemaran countryside seems to have inspired the creation of some of his finest work

### **We love this book:**

*by Katie Allen*

### **New play *Doonreagan* tells the story of Assia Wevill and her doomed love affair with Ted Hughes**

The story of Ted Hughes' lover Assia Wevill is a ghostly one, overshadowed by his first wife Sylvia Plath and half-hidden from literary history. New play *Doonreagan* attempts to tell her side of one of the 20th century's most tragic, and notorious, marriages.

Already married, Wevill became Ted Hughes' mistress in the early 1960s, while he was still married to Sylvia Plath. His marriage disintegrated and Plath killed herself in 1963. Assia herself took her own life, and that of her four-year-old daughter, Shura, in

1969, like Plath using a gas oven. Hughes was beset for the rest of his life by accusations that he had driven both women to their deaths by his philandering and cruel behaviour.

It's a gloomy premise, but *Doonreagan*, named after the house where Hughes and Wevill fled after Plath's death, is an original and touching take on a familiar story.

The couple's time in the house, located in Connemara, Ireland, was intended to be an escape back to nature, away from the pointing fingers of the public. The play is set in one shabby room of the house, while the changing beauties of the Irish wilderness are projected onto the back wall, with a soundtrack of chirping birds, sheep cries and the rush of the sea.

Against this compelling backdrop, insecure, seductive Assia (played by a mesmerising Flora Montgomery) and Ted (Daniel Simpson) handsome, menacing intensity dressed up in wellington boots and country jackets, argue, plead, smoke, fight, write and make up.

Assia has had a dream that the dead body of Sylvia lies between them, and the poet's influence casts a long shadow over any happiness Assia and Ted might have had. At times it seems like their passion - and the beautiful isolation of Doonreagan - might carry them through, but the audience knows this is not to be.

Despite knowing "the ending", this doesn't make the journey any less dramatic. Assia's tale, as the thrice-married daughter of a Russian Jew married to a German woman, and driven to Italy, Palestine and later England by the Nazis, is worth telling in full.

Written by Ann Henning Jocelyn, who lived in Doonreagan for a time, the play captures the elemental forces of the landscape and of Hughes, and casts light on the life of a woman caught up in an impossible situation.

---

### **Entertainment Focus:**

Doonreagan is a one-act play detailing poet Ted Hughes' years living in Ireland with Jewish refugee Assia Wevill in the 1960s, not long after the death of his wife Sylvia Plath. It is showing at the Jermyn Street Theatre in Piccadilly for the next few weeks. The play is a two-hander, recounting over short scenes the relationship between Ted Hughes (Daniel Simpson) and Assia Wevill (Flora Montgomery) as they adjust from the pace of London to the quiet of Ireland. To begin with, city girl Assia isn't sure she'll find contentment in the Irish countryside, but she soon falls in love with the place and it's only when Hughes threatens to move them back to London that the cracks in their relationship appear.

Doonreagan will appeal to students of Ted Hughes' work (the set is detailed with furniture he would have used in his Irish retreat) as it offers an angle on an area of his life seldom documented. The ghost of Plath loomed large over the rest of his life, just as she haunts this play, forever making Assia feel less important to Hughes than his

dead wife's memory. The play is beautifully written and cleverly nuanced. The painstaking research lends it a voice of authenticity.

Doonreagan can be seen as a literary piece that indelibly stamps Assia on the map of the otherwise well-documented life of Ted Hughes. The shame is perhaps that it ends with the story neatly poised, with so much more left to tell.

### **Everything Theatre:**

\*\*\*\*

A one-act play that packs an emotional punch!

Doonreagan takes place a few years after the death of Sylvia Plath – the famous American poet who committed suicide in the 60's. Her husband, fellow poet Ted Hughes, has moved his children and lover, Assia Wevill, to the eponymous Doonreagan cottage to escape public scrutiny. Ann Henning Jocelyn – the author of this play and the present owner of Doonreagan – was privy to letters left behind by Hughes, and had access to his and Wevill's contacts. Using these resources, she has succeeded in writing nuanced, complex characters, so that despite their chequered history, they remain relatable and interesting.

When

we first meet Hughes (played by Daniel Simpson) we find a relatively calm and quiet man, very different from the man Plath described as having "a voice like the thunder of God". Hughes delights in watching his children at play and seems to have found serenity. We later meet his lover Wevill (played by Flora Montgomery) – his common law wife in all but name. It is soon apparent that Wevill takes a pragmatic stance to life and that at this juncture, she is the most self-assured of the two of them. At various points in the play, the noise of Shura (Wevill's and Hughes' child) crying breaks the serenity of both characters, as if it is an omen of great portent.

As the play progresses, Wevill, who is used to living in metropolitan environs, begins to relax and enjoy the quiet rural existence. She pursues her painting, dabbles in writing poetry, and begins to understand why Hughes decided to uproot the family to this idyllic part of Ireland. Hughes, by contrast, finds his powers of creativity are heightened and that as producing some of his best ever work, he too begins to feel whole. However, the news surrounding the fate of Doonreagan disrupts their tranquillity and if there was any doubt before, it becomes very apparent that the ghost of Plath has truly not been laid to rest. Hughes began an affair with Wevill in the months prior to Sylvia Plath's death, and she was arguably a catalyst for Plath's final bout of depression. However, to hear her tell her side of the story, you can understand where she is coming from, even if you don't entirely sympathize. Montgomery does a fine job of bringing her to life and imparting her with warmth, humour and energy – attractive traits for someone living with a widower. Hughes, as written by Jocelyn, does have some positive qualities. He has a good relationship with his parents and understands his father's troubled soul, the legacy of witnessing atrocities during the First World War. Hughes also cares for his children he fathered with Plath and wants them to have daily access to nature, something he cherished from a part of his

childhood. Jocelyn, however, doesn't shy away from the quirky or less savoury sides of his personality.

At one point, Jocelyn relates how astrology explains his own sombre disposition and that he's doomed to live a life full of emotional strife. Wevill is sceptical about this, but the scene did remind me of Julius Caesar's famous quotes, something Jocelyn may have been alluding to indirectly: "*The fault lies not with the stars... but with ourselves.*" The real clincher though is Hughes' candid perception of his relationship with Wevill and their daughter Shura. As many of you know, another tragedy awaits in this story. I knew what was coming, but even I was reeling by the degree of Hughes' brutal honesty (at least the way he was depicted in the play) and the lack of thought to what the consequences of his candour would be.

Suffice to say, the ramifications are of Medean proportions and a reminder that even the strongest of people can succumb to extreme behaviour, if they feel they have no other way to be heard. It is also a reminder that some things aren't inevitable, but could happen again if lessons aren't learned. Doonreagan is a short play, but it certainly packs in a lot of emotional punch into a single act. It offers insight into an obscure part of Ted Hughes' life, and the tragic events surrounding the relationship with his first two wives. This is the kind of play that leaves you wanting more.

### **A Younger Theatre:**

Ted Hughes's life was filled with struggle, glamour and sexual liaisons. His brief marriage to Sylvia Plath was intense and turbulent, and a period over which there has been endless speculation. Doonreagan, however, takes a later period in Hughes's life: the brief time of stability between himself and Assia Wevil as they settled down together as a couple after Plath's suicide. Doonreagan is an ample cottage in the Irish Connemara landscape, and was a place of tranquillity and family for both Hughes and Wevil. This play explores the juxtapositions between the stability that Doonreagan forced upon their relationship, and the true turbulence of their dissatisfactions with each other. The play suggests that no matter how much Hughes was attracted to Wevill, he could not get over that she was 'not Sylvia'. Wevill, on the other hand, feels closeted by the remoteness of Doonreagan, the children who needed attending to and Hughes's insistence that this was the best place for her – a city girl – to thrive on the simple life. The intense duologue between Hughes and Wevill, coupled with the intimacy of the Jermyn Street Theatre, makes this piece play emotionally claustrophobic, not least because the audience are seated so close to the actors. This is particularly effective when Wevill speaks of how she is constrained by the walls of Doonreagan and her longing for the cosmopolitan life. Daniel Simpson is excellent as Hughes, capturing the struggle between his natural sexual charge and creative bursts against his desire to be a well-respected and stable family man. Flora Montgomery uses her tall, slender physique to portray Wevill as a mysterious 'Femme Fatale', only revealing her vulnerability and fear through the eyes. The ghost of Sylvia Plath is the elephant in the room, and is addressed by Hughes as if she is still present. The script, by Ann Henning Jocelyn, is well structured in its narrative, arching over a period in Hughes's and Wevil's relationship, beginning at relative peace, transitioning to unrest and ending on a bitter note.

The set is simple yet elegant, providing a peek into the front room of Doonreagan

with a period sofa, desk and gramophone. With the audience seated so close to the action, it feels as if we are part of the fabric of the house, and the sense of being 'watched' is part of Hughes's and Wevill's daily life. Alex Dmitriev (director) has kept the action simple and intimate, so that the audience feel welcomed to Doonreagan, but also at the same time as if they are unwelcome voyeurs on a messy family drama, that we all know (due to Wevill's suicide a few years later) ended unhappily.

### **Bargain Theatreland:**

Following the death of his wife Sylvia Plath in 1963, poet Ted Hughes and Assia Wevil escaped the confines of London to find solace in the rural and provincial district of Connemara in Ireland hoping it would give them the openness they needed to become closer to each other and further from the ghost of Sylvia. Hughes rediscovered his gift for writing whilst staying at Doonreagan House, creating the start of some of his best work, and as though history is repeating itself, writer and current tenant Ann Henning Jocelyn too is inspired by the house and so *Doonreagan* came to be.

*Doonreagan* consists of a series of scenes between Hughes (Daniel Simpson) and Wevil (Flora Montgomery) depicting the highs and lows of their time at the house; his yearning to write, her longing for simple domesticity and their mutual want for a freedom that London could not afford them. Interspersed between these scenes are projections of an oil painted Ireland – wild, rural and free – echoing the dreams of this doomed couple.

Henning Jocelyn writes with a real insight, allowing the audience to take a fleeting glance into the lives of these historic characters and finding a way to humanise them. Heightened moments of jealousy and anger are directly contrasted by tender, affectionate ones, not least when Wevill remarks on Hughes' ongoing affinity with fish. This is a couple that do seem to really know one another though the ever present Sylvia and the foreshadowing of Wevill's death leave a real chill in the air.

Simpson plays the part of Hughes convincingly, his obsession with Sylvia absolute. Montgomery excels in her role, creating a character that is both strong and insecure, evoking emotions of admiration and pity in equal amounts.

Director Alex Dmitriev has succeeded in creating a moving and poignant piece of theatre. Scenes are well staged and the arc of emotions experienced throughout is put across clearly and deftly. Fionntan Grogerty's stage design is simple but effective. The action is kept in one room and so the set remains the same for the entirety, but I especially enjoyed the use of the record player and easel to further explore the characters' personalities.

Henning Jocelyn has ambitiously recreated a moment in history with a rare and accurate intimacy, allowing us to step into the minds of Hughes and Wevill at a time when they were removed from the public eye. *Doonreagan* almost feels as if you are stumbling into Hughes' journal. A personal and evocative piece that could stay with you for years to come.

### **One Stop Arts:**

I'll admit it: I'm no fan of Ted Hughes or his poetry – he's overrated, pompous and gruff. In fact, I wish I'd been around to join the ranks of outraged feminist journalists

who were historically very vocal of their disapproval of Hughes, and who duly get a grudging name check by Hughes himself in this play *Doonreagan*.

Despite this, Ann Henning Jocelyn's measured, even and academic approach to this towering literary figure (grumble grumble) found me, of all people, yearning for a respite from this true to life, gruff, selfish man. Hughes and his married mistress, Assia Wevill, here played with acerbic wit by Flora Montgomery, up sticks from London for Hughes and Wevill to escape the media circus in the city concerning the recent suicide of Hughes' wife Sylvia Plath. Jocelyn makes sure Plath's ghostly presence haunts their fragile relationship throughout, driving a wedge into an already doomed relationship.

It's a play that we all know the end of and the whole production has a sense of certainty that is hard to shake off. Hughes' children from his marriage to Plath exist only in sound, as an effect. To a certain extent their lack of actual presence could be a device to illustrate just how selfish these two protagonists are, wrapped up into the other still flush from the beginning of a new relationship.

The Jermyn Street Theatre is a great venue, complimenting the latent loftiness the play offers, adding a neatness and sophistication to the text. Good use is made of projection and sound with snippets of the sea, seagulls and other tranquil sounds coupled with projection of misty cliffs, choppy oceans and stony paths which go some way to explain Jocelyn, real life resident to *Doonreagan* in Ireland, and her decision to dramatise Hughes and Plath's stay there.

The psycho-geographical effect both Jocelyn and Hughes experienced, though many years before, prompted a creative thaw allowing Hughes to write some of his best works in that environment. The crew's efforts with the video design by Rebecca Salvadori and designer Fionntan Gogarty don't go unnoticed to this end, and the attention to detail from Hughes' highly ornately designed desk, full of utensils and props, easels, a record player and sofas bring a cosy atmosphere. The video design, soundscape and lighting by Ana Vilar help the production along and cement the psycho-geographical feel.

The direction, here by Alex Dmitriev, is well suited to a typical two-hander such as this, and lets the dialogue breathe whilst simultaneously adding to the slightly suffocatingly tight feeling the play represents, with two big characters such as this stretched to their breaking points.

This two-hander is kept afloat by Daniel Simpson and Flora Montgomery in turn, Simpson mastering Hughes' severe moods, from his childlike curiosity and delight compared to his petulance and wounding, selfish tongue. Montgomery's Assia here rolls with the punches, throwing a few of her own, but fleshes it out by being simultaneously upbraided and defiant. There is, it seems, an inherent desire, from either the view of the director, writer, or possibly both to put on stage two characters that we are not supposed to like: Hughes, abrasive and seemingly unconscious of just how mean he can be – especially in the scene where he initially shows interest in a poem Assia has written, then instantly dashing it to the ground in typical cruel style.

Assia herself, though, shows pity, even disdain for Sylvia Plath, and it is heavily hinted that she knew of their affair and that it may have contributed to her suicide. Together with the fact that she has had a child by Hughes, a fact he disputes, and has left her husband for him make these two, ultimately, made for one another.

Montgomery and Simpson don't shy away from this interpretation and engage in attempts to wound the other whilst seemingly still in the midst of a just-about functioning relationship.

What Jocelyn brings to the stage is a tightly knit historical play. Whilst entertaining, and well-acted by a solid cast, that is just what we get – its known from the start that Assia and Ted are never going to last, and neither is the spell Doonregan has cast over them both. Though admirable and certainly refreshingly different from the sort of theatre fare you see in the West End, have we learnt much? Only that one should never marry Ted Hughes