

The Donnellys: Sticks & Stones

by James Reaney

a National Arts Centre English Theatre production
in association with The Stratford Festival

Study Guide

**THE NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE ENGLISH THEATRE
PROGRAMMES FOR STUDENT AUDIENCES
2005-2006 SEASON**

**Peter Hinton
Artistic Director, English Theatre**



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This Study Guide was written and researched by **Deborah James** for the National Arts Centre, English Theatre, October 2005. It may solely be used for educational purposes.

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About This Guide

This study guide is formatted in easy-to-copy single pages. They may be used separately or in any combination that works for your classes. The two colour pages are meant for classroom display but may also be photocopied for students.

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Introduction

*“Under a full moon in February of 1880, a mob formed in Biddulph township, a few miles north of London, Ontario. Using clubs, a pitchfork, axes, a spade and guns, 40 or so men slaughtered five members of the Donnelly family, including two women. The identities of the killers -- among them a police constable, magistrates and a justice of the peace -- were widely known in the area, yet despite the presence of an eyewitness, who escaped being killed by hiding under a bed, no one was ever convicted of the crime.”**

This violent act of vigilante** justice concluded a true story of decades-long conflict between the Irish immigrant family of James and Judith (a.k.a. Johanna) Donnelly and their predominantly Irish immigrant neighbours. The story continues to be one of the most compelling and controversial in Canadian history. It has inspired a wide range of literary and historical works--more than 50 folk songs, at least half a dozen plays, several documentaries, an award-winning website, and numerous books.

Canadian poet and playwright James Reaney had originally intended to write just one play on the subject but found it *“too large for one evening ... too great a tragedy ... full of levels and generations of people”*. Reaney’s Donnelly trilogy of plays is made up of *Sticks & Stones*, *St Nicholas. Hotel*, and *Handcuffs*. First staged in 1973-75 at Toronto’s Tarragon Theatre, the trilogy garnered much critical and popular praise for its groundbreaking literary form and fresh approach to staging. It is widely considered to be a masterpiece of Canadian theatre and was recently included in the *Oxford Dictionary of Plays’* list of the 1,000 most significant plays of all time.

The year 2005 marks the 125th anniversary of the Donnelly massacre.

*John Bemrose, “When Neighbours Kill: How Scapegoating and the Killing Instinct Produced Canada’s Most Memorable Murder”, *Literary Review of Canada*, Vol. 13, No. 2, March 2005, p.14.

**vigilante: a person, often a member of a group, who presumes to enforce punishment against individuals perceived to be responsible for criminal activity.

Plot Synopsis

Mr. and Mrs. Donnelly have emigrated with their children from the poverty and sectarian violence of Ireland after refusing to bow to the threats of the Whitefeet, a secret society of militant anti-Protestants. The family settles on 100 acres of un-cleared land in Biddulph Township in southwestern Ontario along the so-called "Roman Line", a road of farms belonging to Roman Catholic families like their own. They rent the land from absentee landlord John Grace on the understanding that they will have first right to purchase it later at a fair price. Their growing family eventually totals seven sons and one daughter.

After they've spent years improving the land, however, landlord Grace ignores their previous agreement and sells half of it to another family, newly arrived from Ireland. Understandably, James Donnelly reacts with fury, refusing to surrender the land he had worked so hard to clear. A relative of the newcomers, Patrick Farrell, challenges the Donnellys' right to the land and tries to demolish their home, backing off only when James shoots him in the arm. A court decision decrees that James can keep the northern fifty acres of his land but has to give up the southern half.

The two men, now bitter enemies, later come to blows in full view of their neighbours at a logging bee where Patrick Farrell is killed. Donnelly is convicted of his murder and sentenced to hang by a corrupt magistrate who now holds the mortgage on his land. Mrs. Donnelly, pregnant with the couple's eighth child, walks the 40 miles to Goderich and successfully petitions the Governor General to commute her husband's sentence to seven years' imprisonment.

As Mr. Donnelly serves his time -- and his wife struggles to raise her family alone conflicts with neighbours continue, underscored by sinister echoes of Whitefoot violence. But even when their barn is burned down, the Donnellys refuse to be driven out--a resolve that leads inexorably to a tragic conclusion.

The St. Nicholas Hotel, the second play in the trilogy, traces the lives of Michael and William Donnelly and their brothers as the indomitable spirit of the clan continues to provoke the wrath of their numerous enemies in Biddulph Township, many of whom have risen to positions of authority in the community. The final play in the group, *Handcuffs*, deals with the Donnelly massacre and the travesty of justice that led to the acquittal of the killers despite the testimony of an eyewitness.

Historical Background

James Donnelly and his wife, Johanna (a.k.a. Judith) immigrated to Canada from Ireland in 1844. They farmed at Lot 18, Concession 6, in the mainly Irish community of Biddulph Township in Middlesex County. Biddulph is near the small town of Lucan, about 18 miles north of London, Ontario. With the birth of seven sons and one daughter, the Donnelly clan in Biddulph numbered nine.

Shortly after midnight on February 4, 1880, a 40-man vigilante group attacked the Donnelly farmhouse and killed four members of the family: the father, mother, son Thomas and a niece, Bridget. They later moved on the home of Donnelly son William, intending to shot him, too, but wound up killing his brother John instead. Although six people were charged in the two trials that followed, no one was ever convicted. A sensation in the press for months afterward, the Donnelly massacre remains one of the most famous unsolved murders in Canadian history.

The feud that led to the deaths of the family can be traced back to a secret Catholic society called the Whitefeet that existed in Ireland in the 19th century. Formed to intimidate English Protestant landlords, the Whitefeet would also engage in terrorist acts against fellow Irish Catholics who refused to join them, whom they dubbed "*Blackfeet*." The Whitefeet engaged in what Dr. Reaney describes as "*recreational violence . . . for hardly any reason at all*." This culture of clan violence was brought to Canada by immigrants from County Tipperary.

"HORRIBLE - The Donnelly Family Exterminated"

"Four Persons Clubbed to Death"

"The Houses Set on Fire and the Bodies Entirely Consumed"

"Another of the Family Called Out of His House and Shot"

"One of the Most Horrible Affairs of Modern Times"

"The Whole Township In a Fever of Excitement"

(Actual headlines from *The London Free Press, February 4, 1880*)

Ku (sic) Klux Klan in Lucan

"During the last week or two, several thousand dollars' worth of property has been destroyed by fire, the origin of which, to the minds of all who reside in the neighbourhood, was clearly traced to incendiaries. In addition, some 15 horses, principally belonging to Messrs. Walker and Watson, stage owners, have perished, either by being burned alive or otherwise. The latest outrage, which appears to be the most fiendish, was perpetrated between last night and this morning... During the night, horrible to relate, some fiend or fiend in the human form, visited the pasture (of Walker and Watson) and cut the throats of the whole of the dumb animals, at the same time frightfully mutilating their bodies. These outrages have caused a great deal of indignation in the neighbourhood and threats to lynch the miscreants, should they be discovered, are freely indulged in."

The London Free Press, May 23, 1877

The type of violence mentioned above was characteristic of the harsh intimidation tactics traditionally used by the Whitefeet.

About This Production (page 1 of 3)

Characters

The 14 actors in *Sticks & Stones* play 30 different characters between them, including **Mr. and Mrs. Donnelly, sons James, Will, and Tom and daughter Jenny Donnelly**. Other major characters:

Andrew Keefe: tavern owner and friend of the Donnellys who is eventually driven out of town by Whitefoot violence.

George Stub: ultra-Protestant enemy of the Donnellys who drives out Negro settlers in Biddulph by burning down their barns. Stubs is a prosperous merchant who goes on to become a Justice of the Peace.

Tom Cassleigh: neighbour and rival of the Donnellys who was tried several times for killing an Englishman named Brimmacombe but never convicted. He, too, goes on to become a local Justice of the Peace.

Pat Farl: a recent immigrant from Ireland and James Donnelly's fierce rival for ownership the 100 acres that made up the original Donnelly homestead. Donnelly kills him in a drunken brawl at Maloney's logging bee.

Mr. and Mrs. Fat: neighbours of the Donnellys and friends of Pat Farl, they did their best to push the family off the land, eventually buying half of it out from under them.

Jim Feeney: friend of Tom Donnelly's who is eventually bribed into betraying the family to the mob that massacres them.

Minor characters:

The Census Taker, the Surveyor, the Gaoler, the Friar, the Bishop, the Priest, the Constable, the Ghost, the Showman and the characters in his medicine-show version of the Donnelly story (a play within the play):--False Mr. and Mrs. Donnelly, False Jim and John Donnelly, and False Pat Farl -- Sarah Farl, Maggie, Lady Head, and various other brief characterizations as called for in the course of the action.

About This Production (page 2 of 3)

Style

James Reaney created a strikingly distinctive style both for the creation and performance of *Sticks & Stones* that had a profound impact on a generation of Canadian theatre artists. Much of the material in the final script was developed through collective improvisation in what Reaney called his "Listeners' Workshops", a process in which a large number of people can create plays in a short time. Basic images and inspirations can come from any number of sources in this technique -- a poem, a picture, a game, a newspaper headline, a history book, etc. Participants then work spontaneously to make up the details of characterization, plot and staging in response to the source material.

In performance, plays developed through this technique generally emphasize group collaboration over individual characterizations in what's often described as an ensemble approach. Other hallmarks of the style include

- actors playing multiple roles;
- actors in character commenting directly to the audience;
- minimal use of scenery, with actors using their bodies and stage positions to indicate changes in location and to create strong visual images;
- other non-realistic elements such as self-consciously "theatrical" lighting effects, singing, dancing, and choral speaking.

Themes

Major themes of *Sticks & Stones* include:

- 1) how factors in human nature and in society can transform certain members of a community into tragic scapegoats*;
- 2) how conflicts begun in their country of origin can poison an immigrant family's chance for happiness in their adopted country ;
- 3) how sensationalism** can distort our view of guilt and innocence.

(continued on next page)

*a person or group of people who are punished for the crimes of others.

**a written or pictorial version of an event created mainly for the sake of the striking or shocking impressions it is intended to excite in an audience.

About This Production (page 3 of 3)

Themes (continued)

Many versions of the Donnelly story emphasize the supposed ruthlessness of the clan, making them out to be little more than criminals who essentially got what they deserved from the neighbours they'd victimized for decades. Thomas P. Kelley 1954 bestseller called *The Black Donnellys* popularized this view. Ten years later Orlo Miller's book *The Donnellys Must Die* took issue with Kelley's sensational treatment of the story and presented a much more sympathetic view of the Donnelly clan. For his own version of the story, Reaney poured over historical records about the Donnellys, including documents in the attics of two local courthouses, and, much as Miller had done, set out to correct what he saw as misleading and melodramatic accounts of the story. A scene in *Sticks & Stones*, depicting a traveling medicine show's performance of a melodrama about the "black" Donnellys, satirizes Kelley's book. Reaney also dedicated the published version of the trilogy as follows:

"In memory of Alfred Scott Garrett (1905-1964), the first historian of Biddulph Township to realize that both the Vigilantes who murdered them and Thomas Kelley who murdered them again in his book The Black Donnellys, a name they were never called during their lifetimes, had totally misportrayed Mr. and Mrs. James Donnelly".

Period and Setting

Sticks & Stones is set in rural southwestern Ontario in the 19th century. The events depicted or described in the play cover a period from before 1844, when the Donnellys arrived in Canada, to after 1880, when the massacre took place.

Though the script calls for certain specific set elements, productions of *Sticks & Stones* generally do not involve a permanent set. Sticks, stones, ladders, clothing on a clothesline and other movable props and set pieces are used, along with lighting, to indicate scene changes. Costumes are of the period.

Running Time: 2 hours, 35 minutes (including intermission)

Special Effects: Fog effects, fire effects, startling sounds

A Production Who's Who

A production of a play in the professional theatre represents the collaborative efforts of many, many people, each with a specific job to do. The combined talents of the following people made this production of *Sticks & Stones* possible:

Creative Team

Director	Andrey Tarasiuk
Set/Costume Design	Victoria Wallace
Lighting Design	Robert Thomson
Original Music and Sound Design	Keith Thomas
Choreographer	Nicola Pantin
Fight Director	John Stead

Cast

as cast	Brendan Averett
as cast	Ryan Boyko
as cast	Lindsay Buchanan-Clarke
as cast	Shane Carty
<i>Mrs. Donnelly</i>	Diane D'Aquila
as cast	Kate Hurman
as cast	Jacob James
<i>Mr. Donnelly</i> + as cast	Robert King
as cast	Andrew Massingham
as cast	Brad Rudy
as cast	Roger Shank
as cast	David Snelgrove
as cast	Andy Velásquez
as cast	Sarah Wilson

Stage Management Team

Stage Manager	Marylou Moyer
Assistant Stage Manager	Jenny Sinclair

Before Viewing the Play: Suggested Activities (page 1 of 2)

1. Introducing the Donnellys: a Q&A web-based Scavenger Hunt

“The Official Donnelly Home Page” at <http://www.donnellys.com/> is an award-winning web site devoted to all things Donnelly. As an interactive introduction to the story and characters in *Sticks & Stones*, refer your students to this site to find answers to the following questions:

- a. Why have some people referred to the family as the “black” Donnellys?
- b. What was the nickname of William Donnelly?
- c. How many coffins were needed to bury the five victims of the Donnelly massacre?
- d. How did Mike Donnelly die?
- e. Which of the Donnelly children played the fiddle?
- f. What county in Ireland did the Donnellys emigrate from?
- g. What was unique about the original Donnelly tombstone?

Take up the answers in class as an introduction to your fieldtrip to the NAC to see *Sticks & Stones*.

2. Working with Visual Images

A) Post the photos of the production of *Sticks & Stones* included in this study guide in your classroom. When the students have had a chance to look closely at them, ask them to choose one photo that will be the subject of a timed writing activity. On a signal, give them three minutes in which they must keep writing continuously, never taking their pen from the paper, and using whatever it may be that the photographic image evokes in them as their jumping off place. When the time is up, share some of the written work in class. Are there any themes or ideas that seem to be repeated in the students’ work? Did the image evoke mostly positive or mostly negative feelings for students -- and why?

B) Alternatively, give students (working in groups of six to eight) one of either of the two photos included herein to study closely. Ask them to treat the image in the photo as an event that takes place either at the beginning, middle, or end of a story, and challenge them to come up with the two other images that complete the storyline. When they’re ready, have them show their work as a sequence of tableaux, first in silence, and then a second time with voice-over narration and/or dialogue.

Before Viewing the Play: Suggested Activities (page 2 of 2)

3. Scene Study -- Text and Meaning

Copy and distribute the scene labeled “Script Excerpt 1 - Exploring the Text” included in this study guide for reading and analysis in class. The following discussion questions may be useful in de-briefing the in-class reading:

- a. How does this scene differ from other play scripts you have read? Why does playwright James Reaney need to give such detailed stage directions?
- b. Reaney’s work in *Sticks & Stones* and the other plays in the Donnelly trilogy is often described as “poetic drama”. Which elements can you identify in the scene as adding poetic depth and resonance to the action? What formal elements remind us of poetry?
- c. The scene occurs quite early on in *Sticks & Stones*. What does it suggest about the strengths and weaknesses in the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Donnelly and their son Will?
- d. Throughout the scene, verses from “The Barley Grain Song” are sung, sometimes by a chorus of cast members and sometimes by Mr. Donnelly. What function is served by making a connection between the fate of the Donnellys and that of the sheaves of grain in this traditional Irish folksong?
- e. The scene is a fine example of foreshadowing. What specific event in the Donnelly saga is foreshadowed by the burning of the Sheas’ homestead in Ireland? How does this instance of foreshadowing coming so close to the opening of the play, contribute to what director Andrey Tarasiuk has called an “*innate, underlying classical structure**” in *Sticks & Stones*?
- f. What significance does the title “*Sticks & Stones*” have? What associations might the playwright have assumed would be made with that phrase.

4. Scene Study -- Rhythm and Movement

Divide the class into two or three groups of eight or more students and give each group a copy of the single-page handout called “Excerpt 2 -- Exploring the Staging” included in this study guide. Ask each group to work out their own staging for this brief but complex bit of script. Can they come up with a performance that seamlessly integrates the action and the dialogue? NB: Suggest that they try choreographing all of the movements called for in the stage directions first before adding the lines back in.

*a circularity in plot where the ending is contained in the beginning and the outcome of the tragic action is known in advance by the audience, as in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*.

Ontario Curriculum Connections

Geography, Grade 8--Migration

The story of the Donnellys and their Irish immigrant neighbours in Biddulph Township leads naturally into classroom work on a major theme of the Grade 8 Geography curriculum -- Migration. Research into conditions in Ireland in the 1840s, including a detailed look at the Great Famine and the ongoing political unrest, will help to fulfill the curriculum expectations at this level.

History, Grade 8--Canada: A Changing Society

Research into the conflicting viewpoints about the guilt or innocence of the Donnellys can fulfill the following specific curriculum expectation under "Inquiry/Research and Communication Skills": *describe and analyze conflicting points of view about a historical issue.*

Dramatic Arts, Grade 10 Open

Work with the script excerpt from *Sticks & Stones* included in this study guide can fulfill the following specific curriculum expectation under "Dramatic Forms and Sources" in the Theory strand of the course: *demonstrate knowledge of dramatists' use of form through reading and analyzing excerpts from nineteenth and twentieth-century plays.*

Studies in Literature, Grade 12, University Preparation

An analysis of how Reaney's characterization of James Donnelly conforms to the key literary concept of the tragic hero can fulfill the following specific curriculum expectation in the "Reading and Interpreting Literary Texts" strand of the course: *analyze literary texts by applying key literary concepts.*

An Interview with *Sticks & Stones* Director Andrey Tarasiuk

(page 1 of 1)

Q: The play *Sticks & Stones* was first performed in Toronto in 1973 and later toured to tremendous national acclaim as a part of Reaney's trilogy of works on the history of the Donnelly family. Now the Donnelly trilogy is widely regarded as "a milestone in Canadian drama."* How do you account for its legendary status in Canadian theatre?

A: *It's the power of the story that's at the heart of this trilogy. These plays are about real events – killings, land grabs and arcane prejudices that led to the ugly murders of five members of one single family, the Donnellys, by their neighbours. The events unfolded near London, Ontario, between 1844 and 1880. Various tellings and retellings, including James Reaney's sympathetic perspective, have shaped this story into Canadian folklore. I believe these events and characters have reached legendary status because their violence is so out of step with the way Canadians perceive our nation's history. Sometimes it seems as if people feel such a terrible saga simply couldn't have happened here, could it?*

As for the theatre, when it was first presented, Sticks & Stones was a landmark in terms of dramas on Canadian stages. Reaney's non-linear, poetic approach to telling his story was fresh and challenging to the theatre community in the mid-1970s. His fresh approach expanded the range of theatrical styles available to playwrights and directors because it broke from what we used to call the "Canadian kitchen sink" method (straightforward, conventional, narrative story-telling) and introduced, instead, ensemble acting, non-linear story-telling and rich visual imagery.

Q: What challenges are faced by a company at work on a play written in the distinctive style of *Sticks & Stones*?

A: *The Reaney approach calls for great physicality and versatility by the acting company. It really is a great challenge for a company of actors and a theatre director to imagine this work for the stage. The actors are constantly using their bodies, movement, and their stage positions or configurations to convey essential information about the narrative; they also must evoke specific locations for the audience. Simply put, everyone onstage (and most of the actors are on stage a good deal of the time) must work closely together to tell this story visually. And vocally there are also choral elements built into the ensemble, a call and response technique that's very much in the classical tradition. We try to emphasize this aspect in our particular production.*

Q: In many ways *Sticks & Stones* seems like a very modern sort of play. How does it fit in with the Stratford Festival's mandate to perform the classics?

A: *The challenge of a work like this sits well on a classical company. There are aspects of classical tragedy in both style and the characters of Sticks & Stones. (continued)*

*Lee Rolfe, Winnipeg Tribune, 1975

An Interview with *Sticks & Stones* Director Andrey Tarasiuk

(page 2 of 2)

A (continued): *As I said earlier, the choral elements James Reaney calls for draw upon the Greek traditions and, additionally, the work as a whole is written on an epic scale, much like Greek tragedies. This is what particularly attracted me to this play and I've worked with my company of actors to emphasize what I believe is the innate classical structure within the play itself.*

*Even though James and Judith Donnelly were real people caught up in real events, there's a larger-than-life quality to the way the author portrays them and their family; he has elevated them, made them almost mythological in their bearing. Interestingly, I found that when the company and I talked about this, we all recognized strong comparisons between these characters in *Sticks & Stones* and any number of characters whom the actors have seen portrayed, or even already portrayed themselves, in other plays on our home stages in Stratford.*

Q: What does the play have to say to a Canadian audience in 2005?

A: *The issues of newcomers adapting to life in a new land and the reception the new land offers them still ring true for Canadians today -- perhaps even more so now, for ours is, to large measure, still a land of immigrants. Haven't we just announced to the world that we will seek more, not fewer, immigrants in the future?*

Sticks & Stones is a cautionary tale about what can happen when a fresh start is overshadowed by political and religious animosities not left behind in the old country. In this specific case, the Donnelly family came to Ontario in an attempt to put the past behind them but they soon found themselves in a replica of the very situation they'd found intolerable in their former homeland. The consequences then were tragic and that's the lesson we -- whether settled or new Canadians -- forget at our peril now.

Q: Does the play suggest ways in which a longstanding cycle of violence in a community might be broken?

A: *The playwright very clearly shows in the play just how necessary an equitable social framework is to the success of resettlement for newcomers. Everyone in society is dependent on good governance. A breakdown, such as inequality, puts us all in jeopardy.*

*In its day, Biddulph Township was known as the most lawless location in Canada because, in the name of old-world traditions, the social order broke down. Over time, the same people in that community who were responsible for gross injustices against black settlers from America ended up becoming leaders in the political and justice systems. It is the corruption of this basic social framework that results in the tragedy of the Donnellys and that's what makes *Sticks & Stones* a cautionary tale with something to say to all of us in 2005.*



Theatre Etiquette

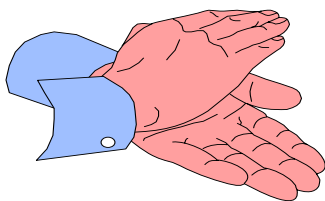
Please take a moment to prepare the students for their visit to the National Arts Centre by explaining good **Theatre Etiquette** which will enhance the enjoyment of the play by all audience members:

1. *The Donnellys: Sticks & Stones* will be performed in the Theatre of the NAC. Matinées at the NAC are for students and the general public. It is important for everyone to be quiet (no talking or rustling of materials) during the performance so others do not lose their immersion in the "world of the play". Unlike movies, the actors in live theatre can hear disturbances in the audience and will give their best performances when they feel the positive involvement of the audience members. The appropriate way of showing approval for the actors' performances is through laughter and applause. For the enjoyment of all, people who disturb others during the show may be asked to leave the Theatre.

2. It is important that there be no electronic devices used in the Theatre so that the atmosphere of the play is not interrupted and others are not disturbed. Cell phones, pagers and anything that beeps must be turned off. Cameras and all other recording devices are not permitted in the Theatre.

3. Unlike at a movie theatre, seats in the NAC Theatre are assigned to patrons according to row and number. It is important to find the seat indicated on the ticket rather than moving around and disturbing others. It might be wise for teachers to pass out the tickets before arriving at the NAC so students can make sure in advance that they are sitting beside the friend of their choice. Remember that in the NAC Theatre, all odd numbered seats are on one side and all even are on the other, so, for example, seats 12 and 14 are actually beside each other.

4. The play is performed in four scenes with one 15-minute intermission. Anyone leaving during while the play is in progress may unfortunately not be allowed back into the Theatre.



Resources

On The Donnellys

Web Resources

The Official Donnelly Home Page: *The* site for all things Donnelly. This award-winning web resource includes a richly detailed account of the story, an excellent annotated bibliography of key books, exclusive photos, chat rooms, and a host of links to pages and articles that cover every aspect of the legendary Donnellys. www.donnellys.com/

The Black Donnellys: Canada's Tragic Roustabouts, by Joseph Geringer: An in-depth "true crime" version of the Donnelly story. www.crimelibrary.com/notorious_murders/family/donnelly/1.html?sect=12

Other Stage Versions

The Donnelly Trail, Christopher Doty, 2005.

The Outdoor Donnellys, Blyth Festival Company, 2001.

Them Donnellys, Theatre Passe Muraille, 1973.

Boys, You Have Done Enough Tonight, Hugh Graham, 1974.

The Donnellys, Peter Colley, 1973.

Film and Video

Midnight Massacre: Donnelly Murders, documentary for History Television, Ron Goetz, executive producer, and Chris Triffo, director, 2004, 60 mins.

Music

Stompin' Tom Sings Canadian History--includes two Donnelly related songs--"Black Donnelly's Massacre" and "Jenny Donnelly" CD 2001 EMI Canada
(Available through the Ottawa Public Library)

On James Reaney

-Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia: Biographical Essay with links to an entry on the Donnelly trilogy.

www.canadiantheatre.com/dict.pl?term=Reaney%2C%20James.

-Lockwood Films produced a documentary called *James Reaney, Listening to the Wind*. Calling it "a glimpse into the mind of a great Canadian mythmaker," its director, Mark McCurdy, said, "It is not a biography but rather a look into the life, creative process and inspirations behind Reaney's imaginative work." The film includes interviews with theatre directors Marti Maraden and Keith Turnbull, and composer John Beckwith.
(Available Courtesy of the NAC).

National Arts Centre, English Theatre, Educational Programming

ArtsAlive.ca (English Theatre): A comprehensive, lively and interactive web-based educational resource for Dramatic Arts and English teachers. Find information on theatre superstitions, Great Canadian Plays, interviews with Canadian theatre artists, definitions of "Vomitory" and "Gobo", links to a host of exciting theatre-related sites and more. www.ArtsAlive.ca (English Theatre)

The Skills Shop — puts theatre professionals and students together for hands-on, in-school, group workshops.

Workshops Plus! — offers pre-student matinée workshops that allow for a full-day visit to the NAC.

Teachers Play! — offers one- and two-day workshops for teachers in areas such as: Lighting, Voice, Movement, Acting Technique, and Design. See the *Teacher-Student programme guide* publication, available through the NAC, for more information, or contact NAC Outreach Coordinator Janet Irwin at (613) 236-2502 or jirwin2502@rogers.com.

The Playwrights in Schools program offered by the Playwrights Guild of Canada (<http://www.playwrightsguild.ca>) makes it possible, for a nominal fee, for playwrights to visit your class to do a reading, a workshop, or a chat about their background. A brochure on the program is available from PGC, 2nd floor - 54 Wolseley Street, Toronto ON, M5A 1A5 (416) 703-0201.

Script Excerpt 1 -- Exploring the Text

ACT One Scene One

(This scene from Sticks and Stones, part of The Donnellys trilogy, is by James Reaney, copyright 2005, with permission of the play's publisher, Beach Holme Publishing.)

Someone in a dress rolls a barrel on stage; "she" covers it with a sheet of rusty tin and then places on top of the tin a model of the Sheas' house. As "she" departs, two men disguised in dresses, bonnets and masks or veils strike matches and burn down the house. The fire makes their shadows glow into the branch map of Ireland (projected behind the action). All this proceeds under Mrs. Donnelly's speech and illustrates it.

MRS DONNELLY In the old country, Will, where your father and your brother James and your mother were born--you were called a Blackfoot if you didn't join the Whitefeet.

WILL Who were the Whitefeet?

MRS DONNELLY Who indeed. They were a faction, they were a secret society, a secret people.

MALE VOICE *from the Others* Six eggs to you Rody, and a half a dozen of them rotten.

GIRL'S VOICE The landlords are tyrants -- English robbers and murderers that rob the people of their little spots, and turn'em out to perish. 'Tis justice to punish the bloody robbers!

MRS DONNELLY Oh indeed it was justice and the Whitefeet rode around at night dressed up like ladies, mind you, so they couldn't be recognized. They made it hot for landlords and bailiffs. The trouble was they made it hot for everybody. Will, there was one family -- the Sheas -- they lived twenty miles off, they said no to the Whitefoot society, no they wouldn't give up the farm they'd just rented, and a good farm it was in those hard times, just because the Whitefeet wanted nobody ever to rent that farm at all to spite the landlord. So no, says the Sheas. Well, what the Whitefeet did to the Sheas one night is so terrible I'm going to whisper it to you and don't ever talk about it again.

OTHERS

Then the reaper came with a sharp hook;
He made me no reply.
He caught me by the whiskers and
Cut me above the thigh.

WILL Even the baby was dead then?

MRS DONNELLY Despite all the mother did she would have had to drown it altogether to save him from the fire and that baby died, Will, because his father wouldn't join the Secret People, because his father would not do what they done, do what they told him to do. *Men start preparing a barrel for a human occupant by putting thorn branches into it.*

WILL It's better to join them then?

MRS DONNELLY And have to help burn whole families alive in their beds then? Sure, Will, terrible and filthy as the name of Blackfoot is -- worse than scab, or leper or nigger or heretic have they made it, they, the clean, just and secret people -- I'd rather be called scab, or leper or nigger or heretic or Blackfoot than do what they did to the Sheas. At first they'd ride by and you'd find a note at your doorway that said --"signed by Matthew Midnight.

OTHERS *whispering* Signed by Matthew Midnight.

WILL Who was he?

MRS DONNELLY Oh, the pretend name of their Chief. The Great Chief of the Secret Society and the note would say

MALE VOICE *under and over* Jim Donnelly!

OTHERS

Then the binder came with her neat thumb;
She bound me all around.

MALE VOICE Jim Donnelly!

OTHERS

And then they hired a handyman
To stand me on the ground.

MALE VOICE Jim Donnelly!

A man is put into the barrel; they roll it back and forth in time to the singing and the speech. Another man rolls on the floor--back and forth.

MALE VOICE If you don't help us cut off the bailiff's ears tomorrow night you are a Blackfoot and we'll cut off yours an'fill a barrel first with thorns and nails and then – with -- you.

MRS DONNELLY Yes. So if you were afraid, Will, you joined them and they made you kneel down and swear and drink--faith to them forever.

BARREL ROLLERS *repeat under* Terry Morgan's in the barrel.

OTHERS *galloping under*

Then the pitcher came with a steel fork;
He pierced it through me heart.
And like a rogue or a highwayman
They bound me to the cart. *knocking*

Mrs. Donnelly and Will have climbed a great stepladder at the back of the stage.

MRS DONNELLY One night, Will, your father was up the road visiting a farmer he was to do some work for the next morning. They followed him there. *The barrel rollers join the mob, barrel tumbling down off stage where Donegan will fall down later, but is hoisted up again; we begin to focus on Mr. Donnelly's back.*

OTHERS Come out, Jim Donnelly.

MRS DONNELLY They said to your father.

OTHERS Put on you my good fellow and come out till two or three of your neighbours that wish you well gets a sight of your purty face you babe of grace.

MRS DONNELLY Your father stood behind the door and he says

MR DONNELLY Who are you that wants me at all?

MRS DONNELLY And they says

OTHERS Come out first avourneen*. *Preparing a Bible and candle Donnelly turns to us for the first time. He is a small square chunk of will.*

MRS DONNELLY He opened the door and came out.

OTHERS Oh Jim Donnelly. Jim, the Whitefeet hear that you let one of your mares stand to Johnson's stallion last Monday coming home from the fair.

MRS DONNELLY To which your father replied *He comes towards us and them with affability*

MR DONNELLY It was love at first sight. Shure Johnson's stallion was mounting my one mare before I could stop him. Would you have me break up a pair of true lovers? Would you? And I had my back turned for the merest minute getting the other mare's tail out of a thorn bush.

OTHERS Did you not know, Jim Donnelly, that no Whitefoot is to have any dealings with the Protestant and the heretic Johnson?

MR DONNELLY Yes, but it was *They extend two lighted candles to him.*

OTHERS Kneel, Donnelly. Get down on your knees. *But he stands. The barrel is rolled back and forth and back and forth in front of him. Swear striking a book by the holy evangelists that you will always be joined to this society known as the Whitefeet and that you will forever and forever obey --*

MR DONNELLY But you see I won't kneel. And I won't, I will not swear that.

HALF OF THE OTHERS

 Hrump hrumpety bump brump brump
 Terry's in the barrel
 Hrump hrumpety bump bump bump
 Jim Donnelly's in it too
 We'll roll you right up Keeper's Hill
 it's true, it's true... *repeat under*

This "it's true" with malign stamping of feet goes on under the speech of the Other Half.

HALF OF THE OTHERS If you refuse, Jim Donnelly -- if you refuse, Donnelly, you won't know the day nor the hour nor the night nor the hour when we'll come to

MR DONNELLY No, I'm not! Kneel! No! Swear! No! I will not kneel

We still hear Terry Morgan in the barrel saying, "It's true, it's true, it's true."

MRS DONNELLY So they cursed your father and called him a

* an Irish term of endearment, here used ironically

OTHERS Blackfoot! *The barrel is rolled at Donnelly who catches it. As they yell the name at him they turn their backs on him, hiding their eyes as if he's too foul to see. They lie down in two rows on either side of the stage--these will become the "roads" of Biddulph in the next scene.*

MR DONNELLY *singing like one of those John L. McCormack records*

Then they took me to the barn and
Spread me out on the floor
They left me there for a space of time
And me beard grew through the door.

The shadow map of Ireland drifting away.

OTHERS *singing into the floor*

Then the thresher came with a big flail;

Mr. Donnelly is letting Terry Morgan out of the barrel, rolls it aside where it now becomes a hollow tree and, assisting Morgan, goes straight up stage, then over to stage left where both figures melt into the chorus there.

He swore he'd break me bones
But the miller he used me worse
He ground me between two stones.

MRS DONNELLY What day is it today of all days, William Donnelly?

WILL It's my birthday.

MRS DONNELLY Tell me one wish.

WILL Well, mother, 'tis something other than a prayerbook. I'd like a horse -- a black stallion. And a sword. Then I'd ride up and down the line and I'd cut the heads off all those who call me -- us -- names.

MRS DONNELLY Go over to the old tree the storm fell down, Will. Will, what would you call this big black horse?

WILL Lord Byron. But he wouldn't be lame, you see.

MRS DONNELLY Now see what you find there hidden among the roots. *He searches, crawling into the barrel; searching around it.*

OTHERS *softly and rolling over*

Then they took me out of that and
Threw me into a well.
They left me there for a space of time,
And me belly began to swell.

WILL It's a parcel. *Actually it is just two sticks*

MRS DONNELLY But it's not likely your father and I would give you a brown paper parcel for your twelfth birthday. What's it a parcel of, Will?

WILL A fiddle. Is it just for today, mother? Just mine for my birthday? But tomorrow will my brothers get at it?

MRS DONNELLY No, Will, it is for you--and only you. To be your music for your entire lifetime. Remember what I've told you today.

Will mimes the fiddle with two sticks; at edge of stage, a real fiddler follows.

WILL *as he tunes* What did happen to father when he wouldn't kneel and he wouldn't swear?

MRS DONNELLY Nothing's happened.

WILL Nothing's happened yet?

MRS DONNELLY Nor ever will.

WILL Are there some of them followed us here then?

MRS DONNELLY Your father outfaced them in the old country, and if they were ever to come after him up the roads of Biddulph he'd do the same to them again. We're not there anymore, Will. We're where **you** were born -- not an old country, but a new country these Canadas. Only bullies and blowhards say at you: "*You won't know the day nor the hour nor the night when we'll come to --*" Aye, yes -- come to a tap with our fists on their chests at our gateway that'll send them rolling down the line like ninepins. *She picks up a stone and bowls it down the aisle.* What do your father and mother care if they should follow us -- whisper me who called you the name. *he does quickly and*

OTHERS *softly* A high grey hill

MRS DONNELLY Uh, it's his tattletale mother is a fat woman has to be raised in and out and onto her bed with a pulley. No feet at all should be her name and his -- the nofeet with all the belly. She's got wind of something and the child has overheard. Will, after this harvest, I'm telling you your father will own this very ground we're standing on and shortly after that we'll own to another heir, not our fifth boy, pray, but our first girl may it please Heaven and when he owns the very ground we stand on and the fields he has made, you'll see they'll never drive us off. We won't be druv!

Script Excerpt 2 -- Exploring the Staging

ACT One Scene One

(This scene from Sticks and Stones, part of The Donnellys trilogy, is by James Reaney, copyright 2005, with permission of the play's publisher, Beach Holme Publishing.)

OTHERS *whispering* Signed by Matthew Midnight.

WILL Who was he?

MRS DONNELLY Oh, the pretend name of their Chief. The Great Chief of the Secret Society and the note would say

MALE VOICE *under and over* Jim Donnelly

OTHERS (*singing*)
Then the binder came with her neat thumb;
She bound me all around.

MALE VOICE Jim Donnelly!

OTHERS
And then they hired a handyman
To stand me on the ground.

MALE VOICE Jim Donnelly!

*A man is put into the barrel; they roll it back and forth in time to the singing and the speech.
Another man rolls on the floor--back and forth.*

MALE VOICE If you don't help us cut off the bailiff's ears tomorrow night you are a Blackfoot and we'll cut off yours an'fill a barrel first with thorns and nails and then -- with -- you.

MRS DONNELLY Yes. So if you were afraid, Will, you joined them and they made you kneel down and swear and drink - -faith to them forever.

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Members of the company in *The Donnellys: Sticks & Stones*. Photo by Richard Bain



Robert King (centre) as *Mr. James Donnelly* with other members of the company. Photo by Richard Bain.



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