REVIEWS

Experimental Dramaturgy, Intellectual and Art-related Subjects in Irish Theatre

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Woodward, Guy, ed. *Across the Boundaries: Talking about Thomas Kilroy*. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2014. 112 pages. ISBN 978-1-909325-51-7. Pbk. €25.00

Carysfort Press of Dublin, co-founded in 1998 with a profile of publishing books mainly on drama and theatre, has become increasingly ambitious recently to bring out essay collections about individual Irish playwrights. Among them is *Across the Boundaries: Talking about Thomas Kilroy*, the second book focusing on Kilroy's work after Thierry Dubost's monograph, *The Plays of Thomas Kilroy: A Critical Study* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 2007), and apart from a special issue of *Irish University Review* (Spring/Summer 2002) dedicated to the work of the playwright. In 2014, when Kilroy turned 80, a symposium was held celebrating his work at Trinity College Dublin. The participants were academics, writers, directors, and theatre makers, all devoted admirers of Kilroy's achievement as playwright, and also as novelist—his novel, *The Big Chapel* (1971), shortlisted for the Booker Prize, is a penetrating exploration of life in Ireland under clerical dominance—and as author of several literary essays. Edited by Guy Woodward, this collection contains selected material from the symposium, arranged in a way that the act of "talking" is its organizing principle: the papers are in dialogue with and respond to each other, while also included are panel discussions featuring an array of critical opinions. What is more, the playwright's is one of the voices about himself and his work in an interview with Adrian Frazier, an essay, "The Intellectual on Stage," and an extract from his play, *Blake*.

References to Kilroy's place in the canon of Irish playwriting usually join him to the generation that started in the late 1950s, including Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, and John B. Keane, at a time when a major change in the political leadership of the country seemed to promise that the inward-looking, priest-ridden, and morally restrictive old Ireland would soon come to an end. Apart from this justified placement of the writer, all the contributors to *Across the Boundaries* agree that Kilroy's theatre is unique, distinguished by formal complexity and daring metatheatricality, while often addressing a most difficult and elusive subject, the artist's vision of and relation to the world.

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Characteristically, the precarious job of attempting to classify Kilroy's style leads analysts to the terms both "modern" and "postmodern." At the head of the collection is Nicholas Grene's keynote paper, under the title "The Modernity of Thomas Kilroy." Considering the generation of Yeats, Gregory, and Synge as founding authors of the modern Irish theatre, Kilroy can also be called one of its modernizers after the period from the 1930s to the 1960s, during which the Abbey was ruled by conservative cultural politics resulting in stereotypical representations of Irishness on the stage. It is in this sense that Kilroy, as Grene claims, "is one of the great modernizers of Irish theatre, in his critical reflections but most importantly in his own creative practice" (8).

Kilroy's early works can be seen as pioneering in making Irish drama more up to date and controversial. Similarly to the ways in which *The Big Chapel* anticipated much later Irish fiction about the heritage of uncontested clerical rule, his 1968 play, *The Death and Resurrection of Mr. Roche*, anticipated much later treatments of the subject; in Grene's words, "the subterranean repressed male sexuality of its time," which made it "a landmark play" (9). In Grene's view, another early Kilroy work, *The O'Neill* (1966), is also groundbreaking as it "brings Irish historical drama up to date with an improvisatory, quick-change, non-linear narrative in place of the standard beginning and middle to end dramatic structure" (11). Later plays in the Kilroy canon, especially *Double Cross* (1986) and *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* (1997), are considered here as outstanding modern achievements, which use a great variety of theatrical (and multimedia) means. Grene stresses that *The Secret Fall* "is a dazzling display of what theatre is and can do, at once beautiful ritual performance, searing human drama and the deepest projections of the psyche" (14).

In his response to Grene's keynote, Anthony Roche considers also the modernism of Kilroy, made uniquely complex as it deploys the subject of art and artist, and their interaction with the social milieu, as it happens in the Field Day play, *The Madame MacAdam Travelling Theatre* (1991), and in the more recent *The Shape of Metal* (2003). By its intercultural and multifocal potentials, art as subject can be a vehicle of showing human transcendence in the theatre where, as Csilla Bertha says analyzing *The Shape of Metal*, "[t]he paradox of artwork being finished and polished, yet remaining forever unfinished and changing" shows itself most vividly (364), a paradox already taking John Keats's poetic persona's breath away in "Ode on a Grecian Urn." For Roche, Kilroy "is a modernist first and Irish second, following on from his great Irish predecessors, explicitly and unequivocally opening up Irish society to the full impact of a European range of sensibility and representation" (20). In this

regard, the modernist predecessor closest to Kilroy is Beckett, for which a notable example is that the three protagonists of *The Secret Fall*, locked in their shared and fiercely entangled story, suffer similarly to the trio in Beckett's *Play*.

Kilroy's own essay, "The Intellectual on Stage" (originally a lecture given in 2012) focuses on some aspects of Yeats's, Shaw's, and Beckett's modernist works. Shaw seems to be the odd man out here whom scholars rarely discuss, unlike the other two, as an exemplary modernist. Interrogating this omission, Kilroy's essay is really eye-opening in that it identifies a point in Shaw's career where there is an attempt "to move away from naturalism and sociology to a theatre of personal vision." This important turning point is, Kilroy intimates, in the third act of *Man and Superman* (37). The reader of this argument is certainly persuaded that it is worth revisiting Shaw's later drama to identify visionary and theatrically experimental traits in them. Kilroy's essay is flanked by Peter Fallon's article, "Publishing Plays and the Plays of Thomas Kilroy," which addresses the necessary collaboration of playwright and publisher in the job of editing (46), a potentially decisive issue scholarship tends to ignore. The extract from Kilroy's *Blake* (2011) places an intellectual, a visionary on stage, interrogated and misinterpreted by a doctor and his aristocratic guests in an eighteenth-century madhouse where he is confined.

Panel Discussions 1 and 2 offer multivocal reflections of distinguished scholars and theatre makers on the reading and directing of Kilroy's work respectively, which yet have some views in common; after all, while we read a play, we stage it in our mind, and the work of directing draws on a particular kind of reading a play. As an important theme of Panel Discussion 1, Christopher Murray emphasizes that "Kilroy's imagination is consistently dualistic," and his is a "double vision" (62), which necessarily entails the playwright's "intense interest in form itself" (63) to represent doubleness, whether in the portrayal of historical characters or artists. These concerns are most visible in Kilroy's character construction, about which Peter O'Rourke claims that "[t]he postmodern condition is very evident in Kilroy's work and, in every representation of a character or person in a Kilroy play, you get this sense that there is no one definitive, true identity, and that we are always performing different things to different people" (74). Kilroy's free adaptations of modern European plays, usually placed in Irish contexts, form another focal point in Panel Discussion 1. In the view of José Lanters, Kilroy's *Christ, Deliver Us!*, a play "*after* Wedekind's *Spring Awakening*" (70), which transplants the original plot to the morally extremely rigorous Ireland of the 1950s, provides a new slant on the

teenagers' story. There is "a shift in the motivations of the characters," making their acts "psychologically more grounded and profound than in Wedekind's play" Lanters remarks (71-72). Adaptations work best, generally, for the national audience first of all, in this case touching a nerve in Irish people, who can still remember the time or have heard about the time, actually decades, of sexual repression and severe punishments for real or imagined sexual transgressions as a source of various personal tragedies in the country until the end of the twentieth century.

Theatre makers' Panel Discussion 2 looks at Kilroy's plays through the lens of those who find their staging a huge, but also rewarding challenge. Indeed, Kilroy's dramatic oeuvre offers an exciting diversity, as Michael Scott claims (84), of theatrically demanding texts. Patrick Mason's example is *Blake*, which "visits at a very deep level a relationship between word and image, as you'd expect, I suppose, from a play about William Blake. Word and image are two polarities in the play, between which flows the energy of imagination" (86-87). In the interview with Frazier, Kilroy provides useful background material (historical, social, and cultural) to both the reading and directing of his plays, in addition to elaborating on his connections with other Irish writers, for instance, through the Field Day Project. The reader is further convinced of the theatricality of his work by Kilroy's description of his own vision of space as a major concern in playwriting: "I think that there are many differences between playwriting and other kinds of writing but one difference is spatial. You have to have a spatial sense of what you are doing: you have to know the kind of stage you're going to use" (95-96).

This volume is a must for all those interested in modern and contemporary Irish drama and, especially, in its self-conscious theatricality. Paradoxically, a question threading through the book in overt or covert ways is: why are Kilroy's plays relatively seldom staged in Ireland, and why are they so little known elsewhere? The answer can hardly be simple or definitive. Studying the Kilroy oeuvre and talking about the plays expertly, as in this collection, may do the most to acknowledge and highlight their uncommon values and challenges for the theatre world and spectators, present and future.

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Work Cited

Bertha, Csilla. "Art and Artist in Contemporary Irish Drama." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 15.2 (Fall 2009): 347-67.