

RESENHAS/BOOK REVIEWS

Lanterns, José. *The Theatre of Thomas Kilroy: No Absolutes*. Cork UP, 2018.

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For anyone studying contemporary theatre, José Lanterns's new book on Thomas Kilroy is essential. Lanterns examines Kilroy's writing and theatrical process for ten plays, positioning him as an Irish writer who blends global influences, works cooperatively with production teams, and is postmodern in thematic sensibility and experimental stylizing. She divides the study of these plays into three sections: "Nationalism and Identity," "Gender and Sexuality," and "Art and Mysticism."

In her "Introduction," Lanterns establishes why she considers Kilroy a postmodern writer:

His engagement with important historical and contemporary issues; his consistent resistance to all kinds of absolutism; his refusal to separate the intellect from feelings and the imagination; his insistence on collaboration; and his openness to an eclectic variety of styles and forms of expression. (6)

Lanterns reveals a variety of philosophical, artistic, and psychological influences on Kilroy's work, including but not limited to Joan Littlewood, Peter Brook, Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett, Jerzy Grotowski, and Japanese Kabuki and Bunraku theatre. Lanterns concludes her introduction by boldly claiming that Kilroy has become "Ireland's leading intellectual playwright" (14).

Part I: Nationalism and Identity

Lanterns acknowledges a focus on identity issues throughout Kilroy's work and opens her study accordingly with "Nationalism and Identity," in which she examines *The O'Neill*, *Double Cross*, and *The Madame MacAdam Travelling Theatre*. The first two plays deal with Irish historical figures, while all three take place during wars. Lanterns credits Kilroy with using history in an imaginative manner to speak to the late 1960s in *The O'Neill*. Lanterns connects the play's subject, Hugh O'Neill, and the 1960s Nor-

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thern Irish prime minister Terence O'Neill, both of whom were "committed to modernisation" and who were "trying to walk a tightrope between the different cultures and traditions" (36). *Double Cross*, produced in 1986, when the 'Troubles' were at their peak" (40) portrays the Irish historical characters of Brendan Bracken, the Minister of Information under Churchill, and William Joyce, the infamous Nazi radio propagandist "Lord HawHaw." Both men "relied on performance, deception, and make-believe to fashion their own reality" (41). Lanter's takes her book title from a description Kilroy gave with regard to this play: "[the] seed-bed of fascism is a pathological insecurity related to national or racial identity. . . . In our troubled century, no other obscenity has been as malignant as this one: the notion of absolute power or absolute truth or absolute anything else being the property of any one group of individuals" (qtd. in Lanter's 41). The nature of extremist positions in this era of fake news has made *Double Cross* painfully suited to the present moment, evidenced by its 2018 revival.

Lanter's suggests that Kilroy chose to counterbalance by turning to comedy next. *The Madame MacAdam Travelling Theatre* is "ultimately about the healing power of individual human relations" (59). In this WWII play, Kilroy "depicts the insularity of the 'Emergency' rather as an occasion for nationalist paranoia" (60). The identity difficulties here surround a drama troupe that has strayed across the border and become stranded in a small town dominated the Local Defense Force (LDF) and its "paranoid" leader. Unfortunately, a small child from the town has gone missing, and the LDF leader settles on the suspicious actors as responsible, primarily a young schizophrenic male who attracts the interest of two local women, one of whom, Jo, was supposed to be watching the child. The young man, already a trauma victim, is taken from the van in the middle of making love with Jo, beaten badly, and as a result flees from whatever promise of love Jo may have offered. Lanter's draws a connection between the costumed players and the uniformed LDF as two sides of the same act of theatrical deception. She describes how the play reveals "the idea that there is a 'crack down the middle' of human beings, with one side tending towards deception and darkness, the other towards positive transformation and enlightenment" (66). Despite some brutality, the play resolves happily; the child wanders out of the forest unharmed. Abandoned by her actor lover, Jo becomes the play's "moral compass," as Lanter's argues, because she expresses concern for him, an act of "self-knowledge and self-reliance, for only someone comfortable in their own skin can compassionately open up to others" (72).

Part II: Gender and Sexuality

Lanter's demonstrates Kilroy's concern with social attitudes toward gender and sexuality through her examination of *The Death and Resurrection of Mr. Roche*, *Tea and Sex and Shakespeare*, *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde*, and *Christ, Deliver Us!* When *The Death and Resurrection of Mr. Roche* premiered in 1968, Lanter's acknowledges that "it was imperfectly understood by Dublin critics and audiences" but that it was also "the first instance of what in his later plays would become a growing occupation

with sexual identity and gender fluidity” (83). The play revolves around a group of heavy-drinking men. Into this mix arrives Mr. Roche and a young man who seems quite unwell, both of whom are sexually suspect. The drinking men “channel their social and sexual discontent into increasingly violent expressions of homophobia and misogyny” (Kilroy qtd. in Lanters 84). Lanters describes Mr. Roche as a symbolic scapegoat, a “victim upon whom a community projects its own shortcomings and towards whom it deflects the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members” (98-99). When the play was revived in 1989 at the Abbey, “the general critical review was that the issues it raised remained relevant and that their poignancy had, in fact, increased with the passing of time” (102).

Tea and Sex and Shakespeare, which premiered in 1976, and *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde*, which opened on 8 October 1997, “the centenary of Wilde’s release from Reading Gaol” (124), deal with damaged artists, struggling marriages, and the lost child motif. The writer in *Tea and Sex* was a fictional vehicle for Kilroy to work out some of his personal problems, according to Lanters (105). Both plays make use of surreal stage images. In *Tea and Sex*, “characters emerge in and out of the wardrobe and back and forth through a section of the wall” (105), representing the people in Brien’s life who contribute to his “psychological and creative breakdown” (104). As the play progresses, it will become apparent that Brien and his wife have lost a child but cannot communicate with one another about their loss, the source of Brien’s creative block, (114). His writing block and marriage problems seemingly lift when he finally acknowledges his wife’s pain and their loss. When Brien’s response to his wife’s question “And how was *your* day?” is to look at the audience and raise an eyebrow, Lanters reads the final moment as “ironic amusement rather than despair” (119).

Because we know the outcome of Oscar Wilde’s life, we do not expect an amusing end to *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde*. Kilroy provided this piece for the Wilde centenary at the request of Patrick Mason. Lanters records, “According to Mason, two biographical facts about the historical characters were pivotal in the development of the play: Constance’s refusal to allow Oscar to see their children after his release from prison, and her crippling fall down the stairs of the Wildes’ London home” (124). Constance and Oscar seem to bond over shared ideas of their own fathers as monstrous, her father having been arrested for public indecency and Oscar’s promiscuous father refusing to acknowledge his two daughters who were killed in a fire. Further, Kilroy imagines that young Constance was sexually abused by her own father. Memories of these monstrous fathers underlie Constance’s efforts to keep Oscar from his sons. Stylistically borrowing from Japanese theatre, “the symbolic function of the child is indicated by the representation of the Wildes’ sons as puppets” (126). Such may also indicate the degree to which history, and their fathers, manipulated Constance and Oscar as well.

Kilroy sets *Christ, Deliver Us!* in 1950s Ireland, when sexuality outside of marriage was taboo. Lanters calls this play Kilroy’s “response to contemporary revelations

about past abuses in industrial schools and Magdalen laundries” (143). Perhaps its “pervasive presence of violence” is the reason behind her choice to use a striking image from this play for her book’s cover art (146).

Part III: Art and Mysticism

Lanters’ writes, “An important strand in Kilroy’s work deals with the notion that the single-minded focus of artists and mystics on their inner vision at times makes them behave ‘monstrously’ to their nearest and dearest and places them, in a sense, beyond the bounds of common humanity” (165). In this section, Lanters analyzes *Talbot’s Box* (Kilroy, 1997), *The Shape of Metal* (Kilroy, 2003), and *Blake* (Kilroy, 2015). In the first play, the focus is Irish mystic priest Matt Talbot, while in the final play, the focus is English mystical poet/artist William Blake. The middle play deals with a fictional female sculptor, Nell Jeffrey, though Lanters explains that she is a composite “of a group of Anglo-Irish women—writers and theatre makers—[Kilroy] had met at the beginning of his career” (191). Each protagonist is brilliant but flawed. Talbot practices masochism as punishment for his sins; Nell has driven away her mentally unstable daughter who disappears; and Blake must put aside his “self-righteousness” and emerge from the asylum to which Kilroy has imaginatively consigned him (217).

The staging for all three plays is demanding. *Talbot’s Box* calls for “a huge box occupying virtually the whole stage, its front closed to the audience. The effect should be that of a primitive, enclosed space, part prison, part sanctuary, part acting space. . . . All the actors, costumes and props required in the play are already within the box” (Kilroy qtd. in Lanters 169). In *The Shape of Metal*, Nell sees her daughter in her dreams, “expressionistically represented on stage by a surreal, speaking head” (197). It is Grace’s talking head that leads Nell to realize “that she has failed. . . both as a human being and an artist” (199), which causes her to take a sledgehammer to her unfinished sculpture. However, the audience cannot see what Nell has done to her work since what had been uncovered in the early portion of the play is now “covered completely in sacking or cloth” (Kilroy qtd. in Lanters 199). The *Blake*, production design is so demanding that it has only received a staged reading. As Lanters describes,

Blake is divided into two parts, and Kilroy envisions a performance space that is likewise “split in two.” Upstage is a raised area above a wall that can open in various ways, “making up cells and entrance gates to the asylum” (p. 11), while the main acting area is located downstage at the lower level. . . . The upper stage functions in part as the asylum’s panopticon that allows Dr. Hibbel and his distinguished visitors, Sir James and Lady Fetchcroft, to observe the inmates without being seen themselves. (209-10).

Kilroy uses Blake’s great poem *Jerusalem* as the sung portions, though he awaits a composer capable of setting the music for production.

In Lanters’s “Coda,” she concludes that Kilroy’s plays “take us out of our comfort zone and explain us to ourselves; they connect the past to the present, the world to the Irish stage, and Irish theatre to the world. . . . His art embraces life’s vicissitudes

and inconstancies, and celebrates the intellect and the imagination in equal measure. (233) Lanter's superb study illuminates the master playwright who brought these plays to the world's stage.

References

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Recebido em: 30/10/2019

Aceito em: 19/03/2020