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ARTS AND STUDIES

SEARCHING FOR THE MEANING OF TREASON

RAY COMISKEY went to Derry to attend a rehearsal by the Field Day Company of Tom Kilroy's new play "Double Cross" about Brendan Bracken and William Joyce, better known as Lord Haw-Haw.

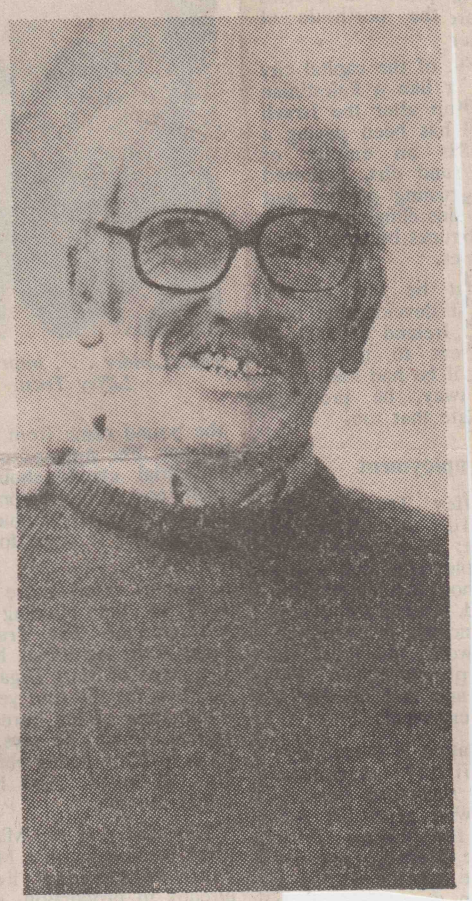
TWO IRISHMEN who were, to varying degrees, at the centre of events during the second World War are the subject of an intriguing new play by Tom Kilroy, which is now in rehearsal by the Field Day Company in Derry, where it will open on Wednesday, January 12th. One is Brendan Bracken, who died of throat cancer in a London hospital in 1958. The other is William Joyce, better known as Lord Haw Haw, who was executed as a traitor by the British in 1946.

They present, in a particularly fascinating way, almost two sides of the same coin. Bracken was a Conservative, a close friend of Winston Churchill, who became his Parliamentary Private Secretary when Churchill was made Prime Minister in 1940. The following year Churchill made him Minister for Information, where he was mainly responsible for propaganda and the BBC. Both before and after the war, Bracken made a name for himself as a journalist and he was, to all intents and purposes, an integral part of British society.

Joyce was born in New York of English and Irish parents. The family moved to Ireland when he was three and, strongly pro-British, later settled in England where he eventually applied for a British passport. But his politics, coloured by Fascism and hatred of Jews and blacks, led him to Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists and, finally, to side with Germany in the war. He became a leading light in Goebbels' propaganda machine, where his sneering "Jairmany Calling, Jairmany Calling" was beamed in radio broadcasts to Britain during the conflict.

The two Irishmen thus found themselves on opposite sides in curiously similar roles. Each was involved in propaganda — the creation of images and impressions, and playing roles; one was designed to uphold British society as its authorities wanted it upheld; the other was designed to pull that society down.

It's a fascinating situation which gives all sorts of resonances to the title of the play. Both Bracken and Joyce had their own crosses to bear — of being Irish and outsiders in a British society where they sought acceptance, of double-crossing their own origins in this pursuit and, in Joyce's case, of double-crossing Britain by siding with Germany. And in much of this they were two sides of the same coin.



Tom Kilroy.

Anyone who expects a strictly historical approach to the subjects of the play (which is split into two acts, the first devoted to Bracken, the second to Joyce) can quickly put those expectations aside. It's not that kind of play. Instead, it's after larger issues; victims and oppressors, the colonised and the colonisers, the double-ness of things (in Tom Kilroy's phrase) and the way opposites attract.

"I have yoked them together in this play," he says, "so that they" — Bracken and Joyce — "may inhabit the one dramatic idea." It is, he explains, a play which tries to move along the line from role-playing and fiction-making to the act of political treason; Bracken is an actor at loose in English politics, while Joyce, in the play, is driven to create fictions out of anger and impatience with life as it really is. "This is the only way in which I can comprehend the essentially suicidal energy at the root of Fascism, he adds.

Both Bracken and Joyce were, because of their origins and desires, actors with particular identity problems of their own. "To base one's identity exclusively on a mystical sense of place, rather than in personal character, where it properly resides, seems to me a dangerous absurdity," says Tom Kilroy. "To dedicate one's life to the systematic betrayal of that ideal seems to me equally absurd."

That statement rings all sorts of bells about ideas of Irishness and Englishness, not to mention relationships between the two countries. Is the driving force in the play the circumstances of the people and the ideas arising from that, rather than any conventional notion of personality?

"That's true," he answers, "in the sense that the way it is written is in sort of jagged pieces. The continuities are not the obvious ones of storytelling or, indeed, character development. They have to do with a kind of field about politics, and about Ireland and England, and to perhaps a lesser extent about these two particular characters."

It poses particular problems for the actors — Stephen Rea plays Bracken and Joyce; Kate O'Toole portrays Joyce's English wife, Margaret, and Popsie, a woman friend of Bracken's, as well as a narrator and a woman journalist; and Richard Howard has five parts, including Lord Beaverbrook, Lord Castlerosse, a fire warden, and Erich, a German anglophile who reads W. B. Yeats.

In Derry last week, where I saw them rehearsing several scenes from the play, including one between the fire warden and Bracken in wartime, which is not strictly naturalistic. I put the point to the director, Jim Sheridan. Isn't it a question of finding a way to play many scenes so that they seem to play naturally when, in fact, their logic is internal to each scene rather than derived from the characters?

"It's very difficult," he says, "because you've exactly put your finger on it — that the logic isn't character-based in the play, I think. It's much more that the events of history are bigger, in a way, than the characters."

What about the elements in it, for us, of colonialism and imperialism?

"There's one line later in the play, which you haven't heard — 'which is more dangerous to the oppressor, the embrace or the Judas kiss?' I think Tom is saying that at a certain point, constantly thinking of colonialism and that kind of thing is counter-productive. The very act of attempting to break it makes one inferior.

"It's nothing to do with Tom, this," he adds, "and I don't want to be saying that these are his opinions, but it's almost like saying which is the most colonised part of Ireland — the North or the South? To be colonised is either an actuality, which the North is, or a psychological thing, which the South is. When you've got rid of the actuality, and you haven't got rid of the psychological problem, which is the worse condition?"

There's no clever answer to that. But it was absorbing, and impressive, to see him working *with* the actors, changing, shaping, refining their interpretations with them as they felt their way into the play. Rehearsals were still at that intense, delicate and somewhat fraught point where all their individual research, and the work they had done with the playwright in London the previous week, had yet to settle down into something definitive.

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Thomas Kilroy's important new Irish play, at the Royal Court from this week, fires a controversial salvo at nationalist assumptions by examining the motives of Brendan Bracken and Lord Haw-Haw. John Cunningham reports

Ireland calling...

THE latest Irish literary polemic to hit the stage comes from the Field Day Theatre Company of Derry, and it is guaranteed controversy by attacking the value of nationalism.

Field Day has made itself responsible for plays and pamphlets about politics in Ireland since it was founded in 1980. Its new play, Double Cross, is at the Royal Court for a month, after a successful Irish tour. It presents two very British Irishmen — Lord Haw Haw. (William Joyce) and Brenden Bracken, both major propagandists during the last war, one a master of misinformation working with Goebbels; the other official Minister of Information and a cronie of Churchill.

Both were essentially the same kind of man, says Thomas Kilroy, whose first play this is for Field Day. And he has Stephen Rea take both parts in his play, in which the blustering Bracken in the first section (the second section of Double Cross concentrates on Lord Haw Ha win Berlin) that comes out fully."

Professor Kilroy adds Bracken has created an "eloquent disguise which is breached at several points in the play. Eventually, his neurosis is stripped away, and underneath all the urbanity, is this vicious little racist. Bracken could be accused of that, too."

As for the need the two public figures had to conceal their pasts, and their easy acceptance in Britain — Joyce flirted with the Tory Party before joining Mosley's British Union of Fascists; Bracken was a Tory MP who tried to marry into the nobility — Kilroy offers this. Britain liked its colonial subjects to turn themselves into ultra-Brits, and was flattered when colonial countries reproduced the features of the mother culture.

Bracken is shown in the play as taking the imitation so far as getting his mistess to dress up as a boy scout while he fondles her. There's rather a lot about sex; Joyce is demented by sexual jealously when his wife has an affair with a German officer. Indeed, acts of personal and patriotic betrayal litter Double Cross.

In this, Kilroy links up with a principal theme, in Field Day's didactic contribution to the debate on Ireland. The company still regards Brian Friel's Translations, which inaugurated its activities, as its central text. That play was about the Ordnance Surrey's map making in Donegal in the 1830s, when English placenames were substituted for Gaelic; the imperial overstamping of the native map, you might say.

Stephen Rea as Lord Haw-Haw

elides into the hectoring Joyce in the second part. Both needed to get rid of their Irish identities, and both found it easy to assume English ones, says Kilroy, who is Professor of English at University College Galway.

Double Cross grew out of a radio play Kilroy wrote about Bracken, who came to England as the proverbial penniless immigrant in 1920 and blarneyed his way into the War Cabinet, the chairmanship of the Financial Times and a title long before he died of cancer in 1958. The BBC will broadcast the play later this year and when Field Day asked Kilroy to write something for that company, he decided to stick with the Bracken theme. In essence, he has added the second half.

Joyce fitted his thesis very well: the notion is of the immigrant who needed to conceal his Irishness, who ultimately became more British than the Brits themselves, judging them for "betraying" their own standards in his broadcasts from Nazi Germany. Both men were addicted to role playing. Stephen Rea, a founder-director of Field Day, says, "You have Bracken, right at the heart of English society, totally accepted by them, yet a total impostor. And then you have Joyce, lashing the same people."

There is no evidence that they met in life, but in Kilroy's dramatic scheme, they merge into one character. "I see them as one man," says Rea. It was listening to archive recordings of the two men's voices that brought them to life for him. For Bracken, a red wig and impersonating the voice were easy enough.

"But what really enflames the character of Bracken is the terrible neurosis just under the surface. That gets the taste buds going for an actor and, in the Joyce play

In Translations, there is conflict between the Gaelic-speaking world of the hedge schools and the National (English-speaking) education system; between the traditional and the new. And change is seen, in a peculiar and poignant Irish way, as always being for the worst, always a betrayal. As to why this should be so, Professor Kilroy suggests "Irish culture never had the luxury of evolution. When modernity was coming into existence, it was an occupied place. Even today, there are aspects of Irish culture which are pre-modern."

Part of that traditionalism involves hanging on to old ideas about national identity, as a sort of security. In its five brief years, Derry-based Field Day has been accused of being too nationalist in its artistic outlook. Double Cross offers something controversially different. Stephen Read says: "I think this play defines us more than anything we've done since Translations.

"It shatters the idea of nationalism completely. It says that nationalism is absurd. Isn't that right, Tom?" Kilroy adds this confirmation: "Certainly, at the simplest level of labelling people as English or Irish. I have great difficulty with the division of people into nation states at this stage of human history."

Any exaggerated notion of nationalism/patriotism has its dangers, and these are extrapolated in the careers of both Bracken and Joyce: the ultimate patriot is the ultimate traitor. Professor Kilroy says: "I think a traitor has to have a pronounced loyalty to the state. Joyce and Bracken were both nationalists of that kind."

That's something that Little Englanders need to think about; relevant to Little Irelanders — North and South — who've been to see Double Cross in droves, as well.

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Parading the psyche

THEATRES: Colm Toibin

THE Irish psyche is having a great airing in the theatre this week. The Irish identity and heritage, the British legacy and the meaning of treason are alive and well at the Gate and the Abbey.

"Double Cross" by Tom Kilroy, at the Gate, which deals with Brendan Bracken and Lord Haw-Haw, is a Field Day production. The words Field Day are engraved on its heart. Since the production of Brian Friel's "Translations" in 1979 Field Day, in theatrical productions and in a series of pamphlets, and in the individual writings of its members such as Seamus Deane and Tom Paulin, has been much preoccupied with the post-colonial world we have inherited, Ireland's English question, our relationship with the English language.

"Double Cross" is tailor-made. It is as though Kilroy wrote it with Seamus Deane looking over one shoulder and Tom Paulin looking over the other. It is eloquent, full of recondite references, aphorisms (some of which are not as good as they try to be), political wisdoms and soliloquys.

The drama arises from the conflict between certain ideas, the use of Bracken and Haw-Haw to evoke the Englishman in us all, the consideration of the relationship between the slave and the master, the coloniser and the colonised in a dance of dislocation, at first racial and cultural and then personal and sexual.

Heady stuff, sez you. Try touring that around the country. It would go down a bomb in Carrick-on-Suir on a Saturday night, they'd love the long speeches about how the victim imitates his oppressor. Franz Fanon rules okay.

What saves the play from its own ideas and what makes these ideas accessible and somewhat dramatic for an audience is the performance of **Stephen Rea** as both Bracken and Haw-Haw.

I first saw the play in Armagh two months ago. The sheer quality, power, commitment and virtuosity of Rea's performance, then as now, kept the audience involved. This was helped considerably by the use of film which made Bracken and Haw-Haw come together on the stage, played by the same actor, who could look like both of them and talk like both of them. **Kate O'Toole** and **Richard Howard** played all the other roles and, in certain respects, the magic of the three actors made the play of ideas seem less difficult.

Stephen Rea in "Double Cross" at the Gate.

Rea's Bracken is more vivid than his Haw-Haw. The accent is pained, each vowel sound is forced and exaggerated, each word is enervated and distorted. It is a mockery of the authority and certainty of the English accent, containing, as well, however, traces of a South African accent.

So that when his mask fails him, when the accent falls down and his own accent, his Irish vowel sounds, come into play you are aware of the tragedy of his situation, his fate as a member of a condemned race who has made the ultimate sacrifice; the loss of identity. This section, the most powerful in the play, has been successfully rewritten by Kilroy.

Haw-Haw seems weaker on second viewing not as a character — neither figure is written or performed as a full-blooded man you love or feel sorry for — but as a version of the plight of the colonised. We never see him broadcasting, which instantly removes his whole power. We do see him, however, as a dead ringer for Francis Hardy in Brian Friel's "Faith Healer," aware of the mystery of his own gifts, at odds with his wife and his friend and, in the end, renouncing chance.

If "Double Cross" takes its bearings from certain writing about African colonialism, so too Hugh Leonard's play, "The Patrick Pearse Motel", now at the Abbey, first performed in 1971, portrays the natives when the revolution is over and their masters have left them to their own devices.

The dates are important. The play is set in 1966, the year in which Leonard wrote a television series called "Insurrection", a tender and moving account of the Rising of 1916 and its aftermath. In the aftermath of 1966 came 1969 in the North and by 1971 an awareness of certain rough beasts slouching towards Bethlehem. Attitudes hardened and changed very quickly.

As early as 1962 Thomas Kinsella had mocked the legacy of the heroes of the Rising in a poem called "A Country Walk". "I came upon the sombre monuments / That bear their names: MacDonagh & McBride / Merchants; Connolly's Commercial Arms . . ."

Almost ten years later, Leonard goes much further. His play is a farce, wonderfully constructed, extremely funny. It is also a vicious satire on our relationship with the past, full of savage mockery of what we believed we hold dear. The speech of Hoolihan (Godfrey Quigley), who took part in the Rising is still powerful and sharp. Leonard is preoccupied with capitalism, as Field Day is with colonialism. (In the unlikely event of them ever getting together God knows what they would produce.)

It is difficult to know what to do with "The Patrick Pearse Motel" in 1986. Brian de Salvo, the director, has chosen to play it as a trip down memory lane, a period piece where we can all twist again like we did last summer with sixties costumes, beautifully done by Joan Bergin and sixties decor.

In doing so he has taken all the harm out of the play, knocked the satire stone dead, transformed a brilliantly clever piece of savagery into a great night out. The issues raised in the play are still deeply relevant and important, a small amount of re-writing could have sharpened its edges.

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