

Elizabeth Kuti's Treehouses: Toward a New Definition of Irish Theatre

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Abstract: *Does a dramatist have to be born in Ireland to be an “Irish” playwright? This article explores the idea that a dramatist can be “of Ireland” and write a distinctly “Irish” play without being born in Ireland. In our global world, the idea of nationality is increasingly fluid. The work of dramatist Elizabeth Kuti exhibits the hybridity of some contemporary Irish plays. Kuti has a doctorate from Trinity College Dublin; she was married in Dublin, and one of her sons was born there. She has worked with several Irish theatre companies including the Abbey Theatre and Rough Magic Theatre Company, two of Dublin’s and Ireland’s most prestigious theatre companies. This article examines Kuti as an Irish dramastist, concentrating on her two plays with Irish locations. *Treehouses* is set in a Dublin nursing home. As a memory play, time and place shift from the Hungary of World War II, to the Dublin nursing home, to some place in England. *The Sugar Wife*, set in Dublin during the American Civil War, explores the lives of Quaker abolitionists. The play discusses the ethics of how money is made and used. Having lived in Ireland for eleven years, from 1993 to 2004, Kuti can certainly claim “insider” knowledge. Tellingly, she describes her situation: “I’m not Irish but I feel a part of Irish theatre.”*

During an intermission of the Oregon State University 2005 production of the American premiere of *Treehouses*, an audience member was heard to say “I thought they said this was an Irish play.” Overhearing that remark, I was reminded of the stereotypical expectations of what were the qualifiers for Irish drama. *Treehouses* is not set in a pub nor a kitchen. There are no drunkards or maniacs. It has an international cast of characters, and its dramatist Elizabeth Kuti was not born on Irish soil. Kuti’s play, however, is one of the many plays that define a new world of Irish drama.

Although this article will explore *Treehouses* and its claim as an Irish play, Kuti’s work is not alone in the contemporary canon of new Irish drama which expands the definition of what an Irish play is. In the United States, it took several years for departments of English literature and the professional groups associated with those departments to use the word “Irish” in describing literature from the Republic and

Northern Ireland. For decades, those literatures including all Irish drama, were grouped under the “British” umbrella. Then there was the argument of the situation of the dramatists from Northern Ireland. Were they British or Irish? Geography seems to have won. Literature from the island of Ireland is Irish although some scholars continue to distinguish between work from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, many of us, scholars of Irish theatre, simply teach Irish drama courses.

The tradition in the theatre is that a dramatist writes to the universal from the specific. For centuries, dramatists have taken ideas, experiences, civilizations, cultures that are not their own and shaped them into a vision of a play which creates its own unique world. Does a person have to be male to write believable women characters and can a woman write accurate portraits of men? Of course they can. Shakespeare was English, but his plays are set in Italy, Austria, as well as his own country.

So what constitutes an Irish play? The most simplistic definition might be to say that only dramatists born in Ireland with Irish settings for their plays can be classified as Irish. So is Declan Hughes’s *I Can’t Get Started* about Americans Dashiell Hammett and Lillian Hellman an Irish play or something else? Hughes is Irish, a founding member of Rough Magic Theatre Company in Dublin. Although written by an Irishman, in his play, he explores an iconic American couple. To my mind, Hughes’s play occupies a liminal space; it is a hybrid. I have heard academic papers presented at Irish studies conferences on Rona Munro’s *Bold Girls* presenting it as a play about life in Belfast. Munro is a Scot who is writing about Belfast life.¹

Munro is not alone. Another dramatist who presents a dilemma is Nicola McCartney. McCartney, a native of Belfast, product of a “mixed marriage,” represents that chameleon quality of nationality that also marks Kuti’s work. McCartney’s work has been produced in Belfast and in her early days in the theatre, worked with the legendary Charabanc theatre company. Since going to Glasgow to college, McCartney has certainly made her mark on Scottish and British theatre. She has said ironically that the Scots consider her Irish and the Irish consider her Scots. Her play *Heritage* about Northern Irish emigrants to Canada in the early part of the twentieth century has been on the secondary schools curriculum for study in Scotland. Like her character Sarah in the *Heritage*, McCartney has recognized the hazards of being too closely identified with a “tribe.” She is from Belfast but she can speak Irish. She considers Glasgow home but recognizes and celebrates her native ties to Belfast. Her plays run the gamut of topics from those with Scottish settings, Belfast locales, European, and British settings as well as the Canadian setting of *Heritage*.² Emer, the matriarch of the play, speaks several passages of Irish in the play and she and her grandson most often converse in that language.

McCartney, like Hughes and Munro speaks to the universal through the specific. She refuses to be limited by her place of birth and by a specific culture.

Even more complicated than McCartney’s history is that of Elizabeth Kuti. Kuti is Anglo-Hungarian. Her Jewish father was hidden and saved by a Hungarian Catholic family during World War II, a story that figures strongly in her *Treehouses*.

Kuti was born to an English mother and a Hungarian father, moving to Ireland in 1993 to study at Trinity College Dublin. As an actress and playwright, she has worked with many of Ireland's leading theatre companies including the Peacock at the Abbey, Rough Magic, Loose Canon, Bedrock, and the Corn Exchange. *Treehouses* won a Stewart Parker Award in 2000. In 1995, *The Lais of Marie de France* was produced by the Andrews Lane Theatre for the Dublin Fringe.

She is the mother of a son born in Ireland. As she writes, "my son Charlie was born in Dublin and I lived there from 1993 to 2004, and got married in Dublin in 1999. So I could have got an Irish passport back then on grounds of residency. Also technically Charlie can get an Irish passport I think and therefore as the mother of an Irish citizen, so could I."³ On her sense of national fluidity, she states, "However on more genetic grounds, my father is Jewish Hungarian with Polish roots and on my mum's side we are English, though my mother has four Scottish grandparents. So more Scots than Irish really, ironically! All very strange." (*idem*). She says, "I feel very English, and also kind of distanced from Englishness. Nationality is a concept that I find very difficult to grasp – I suppose it seems too fluid and haphazard a thing to me." (Kurdi 11). She says she feels strong bonds to both her English family and her Hungarian family and "that I love feeling connected to people and countries other than my immediate surroundings. A lot of all this stuff obviously went into the mix when I was writing *Treehouses*." (*idem*)

Kuti finished her doctorate from Trinity and while there, she discovered a manuscript of Frances Sheridan's *A Trip to Bath* which was missing its last acts. At one time the play was called *A Journey to Bath*, and it is believed that it was never performed. Scholars are not sure if the play was complete at Sheridan's death or that the *last* two acts were simply lost. Matching the manner and style of Sheridan, Kuti finished the play and Dublin's renowned theatre company Rough Magic produced it under the title *The Whisperers*. It is ironic that Kuti who has such mixed feelings about nationality should finish a play by Sheridan who is considered by some to be Ireland's first woman dramatist.

So how do we categorize Kuti's *Treehouses*, her award-winning play? Kuti clues us in to the scope of her worldview by the combination of Irish, Hungarian, and English characters in her play. Like Frank McGuinness in his *Dolly West's Kitchen*, Kuti gives us an international mix. We can consider *Treehouses* as an Irish play, written in Ireland with at least one Irish character. Kuti says "I'm not Irish but I feel a part of Irish theatre." (Kurdi 11)

Kuti may not be Irish but she has "insider" knowledge. *Treehouses* is ultimately an Irish play with at least one Irish setting, the nursing home in Dublin and it treats one of the great themes of Irish drama – immigration. "Diaspora" has several definitions in the dictionary, most of them related to the "the dispersion of the Jews after the Babylonian exile." In contemporary times, the term has been used to refer to the African slave trade and to the settlement of the Irish throughout the world as well as to other cultures. This term has particular resonance for Elizabeth Kuti's *Treehouses*. Emigration from Ireland and the immigration of the Irish have long been topics of literary, sociological, and

historical discussions. What is less often discussed is Ireland as the site of immigration. Huguenots fled to Ireland and as skilled silk weavers helped to establish the linen industry in Northern Ireland and next to the Shelbourne Hotel in Dublin is the Huguenot Cemetery. Kuti's *Treehouses* tells the story of two distinct emigrations, one of a Jewish boy escaping World War II Hungary and one of a Hungarian woman who has ended up in an Irish nursing home. A third story is about a young woman mourning the death of her father. As Kuti's play unfolds, we see how these threads connect, culminating in a final touching scene: "Magda's little room, and the barn where the boy hides." (Kurdi 12)

Treehouses functions on several levels. On one level it is a Holocaust drama. It is also a play by an Irish playwright in the broadest sense of the term. On another level, the play is an emigration/immigration play, one of the great themes of Irish drama according to Irish scholar Christopher Murray. The play is certainly about displacement. Additionally, *Treehouses* is a memory play like Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* or Christina Reid's *Tea in a China Cup* or Diane Samuels's excellent Holocaust drama *Kindertransport* or Barbara LeBow's *A Shayna Maidel*.

As a Holocaust play, *Treehouses* tells the story of a Jewish boy named Joe who we discover does escape the fate of his family, partially due to the kindness of a woman named Magda. It is a memory play connecting it to that genre. And ultimately it is a play about immigration and emigration. Magda and Stephen leave Hungary, settling in Ireland, raising their family only to have part of their family leave Ireland and emigrate to the United States. Joe finds his way, in my reading, to the England of Kuti's birth where he raises his daughter Eva on his own. Old Magda sings in Hungarian; her nurse Ger is pure Dublin and Eva is British. In flashbacks of Magda's memories, we meet Joe, Stephen, and her younger self.

Kuti's skillful layering of forms, genres, and her gift as a storyteller make *Treehouses* the award winning-play that it is. Old Magda in her penultimate speech of the play has a glimmer of hope:

And maybe he too—maybe he did escape, like I did, through all this upheaval, eventually to a safe place, both of us crossed the border, washed ashore and found some resting place – an ark – or haven. . . and perhaps somewhere too a child of his loves him and forgives him for some betrayal of the heart – ...”
(Kuti 81)

Although it is not distinctly Irish, the longing for “home” has been a mark of much Irish drama and that image is used in *Treehouses*. Kuti explains that she was using the image of the treehouse to stand for home and family, but the treehouse is temporary because children grow up. She says,

And by extension that could apply to all the houses we live in—homes, houses, cities, countries, the world – they are often temporary shelters, that serve their

purpose then get dismantled. I had an Emily Dickinson quotation above my desk when I was writing – “What else is this world but a nest from whose rim we are all falling.” (Kurdi 12)

Kuti sees Eva’s burning of the treehouse as Eva releasing her father which allows “him to remarry and herself to grow up and away from him, that his betrayal of her was necessary for her to grow up too and ultimately leave him and pursue her own life.” (Kurdi 12) Kuti sees the act as “angry and destructive” but also it has the “the healing, cauterizing power of fire.” (*idem*) She says it also resonates with Eva’s cremation of her father’s body.

Kuti herself knows what it is to be an emigrant. She is an Anglo-Hungarian who emigrated to Ireland. She is now listed as an “Irish” playwright. Certainly her work is redefining the term “Irish playwright.” Like Declan Hughes, like Dolores Walshe who sets two of her plays in South Africa, or Anne LeMarquand Hartigan whose *La Corbière* reclaims a piece of British history, Kuti expands the parameters of what the theme and nature of an “Irish” play should be. Kuti’s play fits into multiple categories, both as an Irish work of art, as an emigration play, and as a piece of Holocaust drama.

Kuti’s *Treehouses* is not simply a “one-off.” She further explores international themes with an Irish setting in her award-winning *The Sugar Wife*. In 2006, this play won the Susan Blackburn Smith Award which is given to the best play written in the English language by a woman. *The Sugar Wife*, set in Dublin, has two American characters as well as the Irish characters. Both of the American characters are part of the abolitionist movement, one is an abolitionist and the other a former slave. The Dublin characters are Irish Quakers who are welcoming the abolitionists in their fundraising efforts. Like *Treehouses*, *The Sugar Wife* also works on multiple levels, particularly examining the morality of capitalism. In both of these plays, Elizabeth Kuti shows us the richness of the “new” Irish drama. Even though she now teaches at the University of Essex, outside of London, and even though some of her new work has other settings than Ireland, I believe that she will continue to be, in her words, “ a part of Irish theatre.”

Postscript

The American Premiere of *Treehouses* was presented in April of 2005 and it was remounted in October of 2005 for the annual meeting of the Western Region of the American Conference for Irish Studies hosted by Oregon State University and the Center for the Humanities. The production was done in the one hundred and twenty seat Lab Theatre in Withycombe Hall on the Oregon State Campus. Scenic design was by George Caldwell who skilfully created the three distinct playing areas of the script, the Dublin nursing home of old Magda, the barn in Hungary, and the back yard with the burned out treehouse. Lighting design was by guest designer Dan Koetting, now chair of the theatre program of the University of Colorado, Denver. Student costume designer was Kendra

Thysell. Old Magda was portrayed by Vreneli Farber, veteran actress and a professor of Russian. All other roles in the play were performed by students at Oregon State. In 2005, I wrote the following director's notes for the program:

“Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is as strong as death, jealousy is cruel as the grave...” *Song of Solomon*

“Love lost, love found, the oldest story...”

In 1999, while on sabbatical, I had a conversation with Lynne Parker, artistic director of Dublin's Rough Magic Theatre Company in which she told me how impressed she was with this new playwright Elizabeth Kuti and her play *The Whisperers* which she, Parker, was directing. The next year, I saw that the Peacock in Dublin had produced Kuti's new play *Treehouses*, a play that went on to win multiple awards. Soon after that, I read the play and was struck with how beautiful the script was, how poetic the language.

Treehouses is a difficult play to categorize. It is a play of memory, of immigration and emigration; it is also a Holocaust play. Kuti skillfully weaves intricate threads of story, images, and language to create an ornate tapestry. It is a work that can rightfully claim a spot next to other plays that deal with the Holocaust such as American Barbara Lebow's *A Shayna Maidel* and British Diane Samuels's *Kindertransport*. Kuti's play, based on her own family and on her own research, tells yet another story in the millions yet to be told. of the Holocaust and its aftermath. In this the 60th anniversary year of the liberation of Auschwitz, the University Theatre is honored to present the 17 April matinee and final performance of *Treehouses* as an early event in support for and in benefit of the 2005 Holocaust Memorial Week We would like to thank the playwright for all her help and to Irma Delson for sharing the stories of her Hungarian family with us. It has been a joy for all of us involved working on this rich script and we hope that you, the audience, will have an equally rewarding experience. CJH

As audiences left the theatre, they were given a copy of an e-mail from Elizabeth Kuti which she sent to me on 4 March 2005. I had written her asking if there was a family influence in the play. The following is an excerpt from that message:

The play definitely came out of events in my family history, in that my father (who is Hungarian and Jewish) was hidden during the war by someone in Budapest. I met her in the summer of 1996 when she was a very old lady. She's dead now. She was made a hero of the people, I believe, for what she did during the Second World War. My father always kept in touch with her and with her family. They are Catholics, I think, and I think she had my father christened to protect him. It's always been very hard to talk about the Holocaust with any members of my family. My father survived the war, and so did his father (my grandfather) but his mother (my grandmother) died in Auschwitz. My grandfather

married again after the war, a lady called Clara, and I always knew Clara as my grandmother (“Nagymama”). She survived Auschwitz. So, yes, there’s quite a lot of all that influencing the play, but the characters, settings and incidents are all made up. But I suppose the seed of it was that lady who hid my father. She was a tiny, hunched lady when I met her. It was a strange experience because I couldn’t stop crying when I met her, but we couldn’t talk to each other because I can’t unfortunately speak Hungarian and she didn’t speak English. But I remember she looked at me very kindly and talked to me and I found her very reassuring although I couldn’t understand what she was saying.

This was a first-time- event for me. Neither before nor since have I distributed a “post-show” program. Because of the nature of the play, that we were doing the final performance as a benefit for the Holocaust Memorial Week on campus, that it was the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, sharing the inspiration behind the play seemed appropriate. Audiences were very moved by *Treehouses*. One of my most intense memories of the production is finding my friend Bill sobbing in the audience at the end of the play. Bill is in his seventies, a retired theatre professor; I had never seen him react so viscerally to a play. He wasn’t the only one in tears by the end. *Treehouses* is a powerful and moving play that creates a memorable and moving experience in the theatre.

Notes

- 1 At least one Belfast actress confided in me that she thought Munro spent three days in Belfast and then wrote her play; to her mind, Munro’s play did not capture the Northern Irish experience.
- 2 Does Martin McDonagh truly qualify as an Irish dramatist even though he was born and lived his life in London? Most critics, it seems, have little problem categorizing him as an Irish dramatist. Like McCartney and Kuti, he also locates his work outside of Ireland. His *Pillowman* is set in some unspecified European country
- 3 Elizabeth Kuti, personal communication to Charlotte Headrick, 11 October 2009.

Works Cited

Kurdi, Maria. “Interview with Elizabeth Kuti”, *Irish Literary Supplement*, Vol. 23, 11. 22 March 2004.
Kuti, Elizabeth. *Treehouses*. London: A & C Black, 2003.