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REMEMBERING KATHARINE WORTH (1922–2015)

Anthony Roche

Like so many others, I first met Katharine Worth at the Yeats International Summer School (in 1986). Three years later I had the pleasure as Associate Director of joining with Director Liz Butler-Cullingford in inviting Katharine back to Sligo to take a central and multi-tasking role in the theme of that year's school, "Yeats and Beckett." In all, she lectured and directed drama workshops at the summer school on eight occasions between 1967 and 1995. Katharine Worth's lectures in Sligo claimed a central space and importance for Yeats's lifelong experimentation as a playwright, drawing the listener in to the inner workings of the plays and unpacking the manifold meanings they contained. Her theater workshops were extraordinary: taking a global and wildly diverse group of students, she forged them into a coherent ensemble within a bare two weeks. She opened the drama workshop's production of *The Words Upon the Window-Pane* with a stunning *coup de theatre*. A curtain was rapidly drawn back to disclose the entire cast of a dozen or so standing and volubly speaking their lines at the same time; the curtain was pulled shut and when it once more opened the play proper began. What an arresting way to start a play about mediumship! Mrs. Henderson's different voices (Jonathan Swift and his women, etc.) were distributed out among various members of the cast. I will always hear the following line delivered in the distinctive child's voice adopted by one of the students: "Power all used up. Lulu can do no more." In another year at the Yeats School, when one of her key actors disappeared back at short notice to the United States, Katharine swooped on an unsuspecting Ron Schuchard, relaxing in the bar having given his lecture that morning. She said she had cast him as the father Maurteen Bruin in the Yeats play, *The Land of Heart's Desire*. Ron protested that he had never acted in a play in his life, but Katharine was having none of it: "she met my every protest with perfect persuasion until, knowing that I should not consent, I consented." During the week, under her patient coaching and encouragement, Ron gained the necessary confidence; but faced with the stage and the bright lights on opening night, he froze: "Katharine's soothing voice whispered 'Don't worry' off stage and prompted me, jump started me, back into the performance. All was well; I made it through on the grace of a great director."

When I first met Katharine Worth, I already knew and had drawn deeply upon her pioneering study, *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett* (London: The Athlone Press, 1978). Far from seeing Yeats's drama as in any way marginal either in relation to his own writing career or the history of the

theater, Katharine placed his dramatic experiments at the centre of a European modernist tradition, at the cutting edge of the avant-garde in the early decades of the twentieth century. Her analysis opened up the various other artistic areas on which his drama drew—dance, music, design—and showed how, far from being an anachronism, Yeats’s drama anticipated some of the most important developments in modern theater practice. In relation to Yeats’s Irishness, Katharine’s book drew a “line running from Synge through Yeats and O’Casey to Beckett” which she argued persuasively “has become the main line of modern drama” (121). *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett* had a huge influence, both on theater practice and on criticism. Christopher Fitz-Simon, the then Artistic Director of the touring Irish Theatre Company, was so impressed by the book’s argument that he produced a season comprising Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and a double bill of Yeats’s *On Baile’s Strand* and Synge’s *The Well of the Saints*. My 1994 monograph, *Contemporary Irish Drama: From Beckett to McGuinness*, signals its indebtedness to Katharine’s study in its subtitle and opening chapter, “Yeats and Beckett: Among the Dreaming Shades.” Her influence continues into the recent magisterial work by Michael McAteer, *Yeats and European Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), which shows how Yeats “worked in constant dialogue with new developments in London, Paris” and the rest of Europe (193).

By the time I met Katharine, difficult as it is to believe, given her energy and multiple activities, she had just retired. Richard Allen Cave’s *Guardian* obituary of March 6, 2015, gives a vivid account of just how much she achieved in her academic career, notably as founder of the Department of Drama and Theatre at Royal Holloway, University of London. Cave remarks how “it was typical of her indomitable vision and drive that in 1978 she achieved the creation of a new department at a time when many arts departments were facing closure.” Katharine Worth was in the vanguard of those who worked to establish drama and theater studies as a university discipline in which performance and its analysis would play a central role. In *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett* she is often able to counter the dearth of Yeats productions in the professional theater by drawing on examples of productions of Yeats plays which she had directed with her students. Katharine was a mighty persuader, as the Ron Schuchard incident reveals, and even the notoriously reticent and reclusive Samuel Beckett was not immune. Katharine managed to persuade Beckett to allow her to dramatize his novella, *Company*, with the actor Tim Pigott-Smith, which went on to win a Fringe First at Edinburgh. When she was to deliver the opening lecture at a one-day University College Dublin conference on Brian Friel, designed to celebrate the playwright’s seventieth birthday, I received a call from Brian asking me at what time Katharine would be speaking. When I chaffed him by saying, “What do you want to know for? You never go

to talks on your own work” he replied, “I’d like to pay my respects.” So there was the notoriously shy and private Brian Friel the following morning in Newman House, seated very visibly in the back row for Katharine’s lecture. Afterwards, as he and she laughed and chatted, I could see just how Beckett had opened up to the radiance of her personality and intelligence.

Katharine was a wonderful conversationalist and inherently sociable (one of the reasons, I would say, why she chose theater). She was the best of companions, balancing warm sympathy with keen intelligence, always animated and great fun, whether at dinner, at a play, or just going for a walk. She and I began a friendship at that first Sligo meeting which deepened and developed over the next twenty years. At least once a year, she would come to Dublin and I would go over to London and we would see plays together. Some of the highlights included Frank McGuinness’s *Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me* at the Hampstead, with Stephen Rea and Alec McCowen, and three nights in succession at the DruidSynge cycle of the plays in Dublin, where she was interviewed on the subject by Catherine Foley of *The Irish Times*. Probably the most special was when we attended (with Richard Allen Cave) a most unusual double bill at the Young Vic, pairing one act of Brian Friel’s *Lovers* with a play by her beloved Maurice Maeterlinck, so central to the argument of *The Irish Drama of Europe*. As the latter unfolded, I felt I was watching an early version of Beckett’s *Endgame*—the same silences and repetitions, the same ghostly scenario, the same “drama of the interior” (to use Katharine’s phrase). I spoke about the connection afterwards—as if it was news to her! But she reacted with her usual grace and interest, as if she had not written pages on the same theme. Often, when she came to Ireland, she stayed with me or, later, with Katy and our two children (Katharine, herself the mother of three, was delightful and natural with them). On one occasion, as she notes in *Samuel Beckett’s Theatre: Life Journeys* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), she and I visited the sites around Foxrock and the Ballyogan area associated with Beckett. I often stayed in her house in Teddington, with Katharine and her husband, George, the wonderful supportive presence in her life. George was the perfect English gentleman and a retired headmaster, with a quietly infectious sense of humor. He had a passion for clocks, with which he had filled their house, and there was the most extraordinary chiming every hour on the hour. I met their three grown up children on various occasions, especially Libby, who fittingly had come to teach drama and theater at Royal Holloway.

It was Libby who contacted me in February 2015 to say that Katharine had died and to invite me to the funeral in Teddington. Naturally, I went over, not only on my own behalf but also to represent her many Irish friends who could not be present. During the service, Libby read Yeats’s poem, “The Wild Swans of Coole” and her son Christopher spoke of his mother’s love of Ireland.

Afterwards Libby and I reminisced about the Yeats Summer School in Sligo and of the many times she had visited the School with Katharine when growing up. A commemorative day was held at Royal Holloway the following September to which I contributed a sheaf of memories by former directors of the Yeats Summer School who had invited Katharine over the years—Ron Schuchard, on whose account I have drawn here, but also Declan Kiberd, Liz Cullingford and Katharine's close friend, the late Barbara Hardy, who included the following wonderful memory: "Katharine singing round midnight as we gathered in the Imperial Hotel or the Social Centre, and once reading a short poem—I hadn't known she wrote poetry—at a student party." Richard Allen Cave presented the commemoration with natural grace and those on stage included the Irish actor Lisa Dwan, who recited some of Beckett's poems, and Christopher Worth, who spoke about his mother's work on Oliver Goldsmith and Richard Brinsley Sheridan. She wrote about all of the major Irish playwrights, from Goldsmith and Sheridan through to Beckett and Friel. But it was Yeats who remained at the centre of her creative attention, whose dramatic "deeps of the mind" she spent a lifetime exploring. It was this primal fact which made her daughter's reading of "The Wild Swans at Coole" during the service so moving. In 2003, I contributed an entry on Katharine to the *Encyclopedia of Ireland*, edited by Brian Lalor for Gill and Macmillan. Next time I saw her, I told her she had been given the ultimate accolade: that of honorary Irishwoman. I can still recall her delighted response. She deserved no less, for Katharine Worth was, in Declan Kiberd's words, "one of the presiding geniuses of Irish Studies in the latter decades of the twentieth century."