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Author(s)	Kenny, John
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Naked before God

There will be a loud bang during the performance. So reads the warning above the door for those who enter to see Druid's production of Stuart Carolan's second play, *The Empress of India*, which has just finished its run at the Town Hall Theatre Galway and which will feature at the Abbey for the Dublin Theatre Festival.

A philosophically complex play in script and implication, *The Empress* elicited one kind of instant recoil in a local Fine Gael TD who, in a front-page report in the *Galway Advertiser*, underlined his refusal to participate on one of the opening nights in a standing ovation for a "very vulgar play" that is "crude and completely over the top". Righteous indignation in others is always its own enticement to see for oneself the occasion for distaste, but it may be that the second act's apparently objectionable central sex scene will perform for some as the easiest figuration, and thus easeful containment, of key issues raised by the play that are far more crucially threatening to us than a few moments of honest nudity and brazen bedroom dialogue.

The situation for these issues is perhaps overly familiar for Irish audiences. Nine years before the action a family has been decimated by the death of the mother, and now the irretrievably despairing and ailing father, previously decimated when young by the death of his brother, fails anew with his two sons to come to terms with loss and with each other on the occasion of the disappearance in London of the remaining female of the family, the daughter, Kate. Complaints that these men enjoy character development while the women remain static as mere symbols or ideas (the lost mother, the nurse as surrogate mother, the mad daughter, the shallow harpy of a girlfriend) should not be entertained since the overarching theme is the failure of archetype in the grandest sense, the failure for these Catholic men of God the Father and Mary Our Mother.

Let the frequent awkwardness of the dramaturgical treatment surrounding this crisis of belief stand. Theatre can be as much about affect as formal effect and *The Empress* affect is a powerful mix of horror and laughter as the three men fume about the stage shaking the fist at Buddhist, Jew and Christian alike, straddling statues of the Virgin Mary and indulging in long cursing soliloquies and litanies about misfortune and disaster that call to mind not only equivalent moments in Shakespeare or Beckett but the originating diatribes of *Job* and *Ecclesiastes*. The philosophical pessimist's warning that when we humans laugh we are actually crying was never better heeded: the play bravely builds an antic comedy around "this false hope in our hearts ... That there is something when there is nothing" without ever comforting the audience with a resolution.

Our rationalist and secularist imperatives would have us grow beyond wasting our time with personal crises of faith and existentialist folderol about Nothingness when staunch religious adherence continues to provide us with all-too-real worldly crises. But the most challenging aspect of *The Empress* is its invitation to imagine - if personal experience has not already provided occasion - what it might be like to experience private grief that is irremediable by either rationalisation or religion. And the play is well aware of the principal irony involved in any precipitate notion that we can just yet simply think ourselves into a steady post-religious mentality, an irony James Wood identified as central to contemporary western literature in *The Broken Estate* (1999): "If religion is true, one must believe absolutely. And if one chooses not to believe, one's choice is marked under the category of a refusal, and is thus never

really free: it is the duress of a recoil. Once religion has revealed itself to you, you are never free”.

A way round this irony was suggested by Theodor Adorno in the extraordinary short essay “Theses Against Occultism” from *Minima Moralia* (1951): “The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption.” But *The Empress* understands the difficulty of holding to even this reconstructed hope; this rationalised philosophy of “as if” is not easily available to those under duress of recoil. This play is not merely *about* the problem of religious belief; it is *of* the problem of religious belief. It does not peep at grief, whispering contemplative findings over its shoulder; it stands aside, shouts us into place alongside and lets us have its anguished messy bang full in the eyes. There is no neat intercession here, no *deus ex machina* in either the metaphysical or dramatic sense.

To the thorough sceptic it may be the greatest self-indulgence of individual consciousness to simply stew in the certitude of its own obliteration and uncertain redemption. But *The Empress* knows that aside from concern for our own precious selves it is nothing short of a disgrace, a dis-grace, that others die on us.

John Kenny is a lecturer in the Department of English, NUI Galway.