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**Gallows and Other Tales of Suspicion and Obsession By John Arden Original Writing, 506pp. EUR 24.99**

#### **JOHN KENNY**

OLD AGE, says the adage, is no place for sissies. As if to prove the point, while writers traditionally soften up as the years pile on and angry young pens are weakened or calmed, John Arden, now entering his 80th year, goes on robustly, raging more than most.

Still perhaps most immediately noted for Serjeant Musgrave's Dance (1959), the play that ushered him to the forefront of British drama for the 1960s, Arden emerged, after a sequence of major plays during that decade, as a force to be reckoned with off the stage as well as on. An embodiment as well as an aesthetic exponent of the radical spirit of this formational period, he has continued in the intervening decades to speak out as he sees fit about the vital issues of the day. The usual view is that his uncompromisingly leftist cultural and political stances, and a related tendency towards didacticism over artistry in his work, have done a disservice to a career that began with great promise.

It is easy to understand why Arden fell foul of the British theatrical establishment, and critical opinion generally. With his long-time artistic collaborator, Margaretta D Arcy, a politically active Irish actor who performed in some of his first plays and married him in 1957, he has never tempered his sense of personal integrity with the quietism often necessary for the fulfilment of professional ambition and remuneration.

The couple were so resolutely independent that in 1972 they picketed the Royal Shakespeare Company over their own play, *The Island of the Mighty*, because of issues to do with script control. At this time, they had also, after regularly holidaying in the west of Ireland since the early 1960s, moved permanently to Galway, and their interest in the civil rights movement in the North, along with their membership for a period of Official Sinn Féin, probably did little to convince Arden's increasing number of detractors that he would be compromising on any front any time soon. Because of his close involvement with causes from anti-nuclear and anti-Vietnam War campaigns, to anti-Shell Oil and anti-Bush demonstrations, Arden's work has been regularly dismissed as the product of a programmatically agitated and agitating sensibility.

WHATEVER THE social responsibilities of writers, it is less easy to understand why Arden's fiction, the site of his better literary endeavours for the past 30 years, has not been granted proper critical attention. While he has continued to turn out important radio and stage dramas since his move to Ireland at 26 hours long, *The Non-Stop Connolly Show*, written with D Arcy and staged at Liberty Hall in 1975, is regularly mentioned as one of the grand events of modern drama in Ireland the readiest evidence for Arden's continued extravagant creativity is to be found in his novels and, more recently, his short fiction.

His novel *Silence Among the Weapons* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1982. *Books of Bale* (1988), a door stopper about the eponymous 16th-century Bishop of Ossory, was never going to be a crowd-pleaser; and it was indicative of the developing animus against his work that when his last novel, *Jack Juggler and the Emperor's Whore*, appeared in 1995, even the delightful title itself was scorned in some reviews as evidence of whimsy.

Lest any doubt remain at that point about his intentions, with the earlier *Cogs Tyrannic* (1991), a quartet of novellas, with its titular nod to William Blake, Arden had affirmed his place at the forefront of the idiosyncratic creative legacy of Romanticism. *The Stealing Steps* (2003), a more conventional arrangement of nine short stories, proved more broadly popular and it was at that stage arguably the best of his output in any genre.

To coincide with his landmark birthday, Arden has collected 12 new stories in a manner similar to *The Stealing Steps*. Organised into three sections (Ireland, London, and his native Yorkshire), *Gallows* was not written as an orchestrated volume but was compiled after individual compositions when a mutuality of theme became evident. Aside from its sheer size, unusual for a series of stories, this book is an event.

*Gallows* comes with a short DVD film about the author by his son, Finn, which allows Arden to contextualise himself in his own words and which includes a slide show of scenes from the stories that Arden has painted as accompaniment to his own act of writing and as illustration for his readers. While Arden admits in passing that the paintings may not be very good, it is appropriate that the originals are on display in Galway City Museum this month in that they perfectly encapsulate, by way of a neat counterpoint, an aspect crucial to any initial understanding of his fictional world. The paintings are in stylised miniature, whereas it may be the main difficulty of Arden's novels and stories that the world he portrays is bigger and broader than what we are generally accustomed to in contemporary fiction.

In keeping with his sense of the impact of external forces on people's lives, Arden's fictional settings have ranged impressively from ancient Egypt to late 15th-century Germany, from Ireland in the 16th

century to 20th-century Northern Ireland and Britain, from 14th-century Yorkshire to Napoleonic France to 19th-century Liverpool. History, for Arden, is always all.

THE TITLE STORY of Gallows moves between modern and 17th-century Galway, and its two companion Ireland stories are forceful treatments of equally aggressive public bus drivers and American presidents. Molly Concannon, the deranged Galway campaigner we were introduced to in *The Stealing Steps*, resurfaces to tremendous effect. *A Masque of Blackness*, concerning Ben Jonson's involvement in the Gunpowder Plot, is the highlight of the London stories. The Yorkshire stories, while focused on present-day happenings, highlight the distinctive qualities for which Arden should be more attended: an effortless moving between historical periods; interest in textual flotsam (posters, letters, journals, headlines); a capacity for digression rare in current fiction; a sense of the clamorous that realistically precludes happy endings for his characters.

To begin appreciating such work, readers must cast off any expectations of narrative reduction or control. Like most of his protagonists, Arden's fiction is characteristically unruly, consciously devoted to what he once invoked as the old essential attributes of Dionysus .

As with all his work, Gallows is simultaneously a declaration of individual freedom and a provocation of collective conscience. Arden's pen may be more blunderbuss than blade, but it is heartening to think of him still up there, head high on the battlements, blasting away into the open while others plot more cautiously below.