

ABSTRACT

CIRCLES AND SQUARES: REPRESENTING A GRECO-IRISH WORLD

By

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December 2014

The costume design, created by myself– Jessica Ann Wallace– for CSULB’s Spring 2014 production of Marina Carr’s *By the Bog of Cats* utilized the symbology of the circle juxtaposed to that of the square along side the ageless style of mid-twentieth-century Irish Travellers in order to both capture and enhance the world and themes of this Irish tragedy. In mixing these three inspiration points, the costume design reflects Carr’s thematic emphasis of fate, tragedy, and relentless cycles within a mystic, supernatural world. The circle visually represents an awareness of forces outside oneself, and thus characters who gravitate towards this end of the spectrum are portrayed in costumes with curvilinear lines; whereas, the square delineates characters who lack a mystical awareness and are more grounded with earthly matters through angular, straight lines. *By the Bog of Cats* is a play inspired by Greek tragedy yet set within a numinous Irish world; by using universal symbols for silhouette inspiration with the ambiguous style worn by Irish Travellers, the costume design effectively captures the essence of such a unique yet timeless story.

CIRCLES AND SQUARES: REPRESENTING A GRECO-IRISH WORLD

A PROJECT REPORT

Presented to the Department of Theatre Arts
California State University, Long Beach

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts in Technical Theatre
Option in Costume Design

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December 2014

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THE CIRCLE AND THE SQUARE: REPRESENTING A GRECO-IRISH WORLD

Fate: “the will or principle or determining cause by which things in general are believed to come to be as they are or events to happen as they do” (“Fate”). The Ancient Greeks believed that fate is inescapable; those who tried to free themselves from their fate found their actions futile as the prophecies handed to them came to fruition in a series of unexpected or ironic events. Oedipus, for example, “is doomed to kill his father and marry his mother, and despite his active efforts to avoid such an awful outcome, (he) unwittingly realizes his fate” (Norenzayan, Lee 702). In this sense, fate is binding, unforgiving, and fixed. However, the Celtic understanding of fate and foreknowledge is more fluid in nature. The Celts believed that to know the future is to know the past; seers created prophecies by “looking back in time, not forward” (Wood 86). Thus, the concept of Celtic fate is derived from the understanding of patterns and cycles within life reflecting their overall belief that life leads to death, which leads back to life; they celebrated the seasons dutifully giving way to one another, completing an eternal spiraling circle (Wood 25). Graphically, the circle– in various forms, depending on cultural idiosyncrasies– has come to visually represent ideas such as fate, the cycle of life, and eternity. The Ourobours motif, for example, is an animal– usually a snake– caught in a continual circle by eating its own tail; it signifies infinity, for it is in a constant state of cyclicity. (Shepard, Shepard 231).

Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* explores the concept of Fate and the never-ending circle of life by mixing hints of Greek tragedy with Irish mysticism, thus creating an enduring story of a scorned and fated lover living in the mystical backlands of the Bog of Cats in Ireland. In the tragi-mystic world Carr has built for the play, fate and spirituality coincide with unavoidable patterns, often circular or spiral in nature enhancing a sense of timelessness within the story. For example, dawn is mistaken for dusk; Hester laments over perpetuating a cycle of maternal abandonment; Josie Swane embodies the spirit of Big Josie (her grandmother); and Hester's life both begins and ends with Auld Black Wing, the black swan of the bog. The costume design for *By the Bog of Cats* reflects and enhances the significance of fate, timelessness, and life's cyclical nature within this classically Tragic world by utilizing the symbology of the circle.

The narrative for *By the Bog of Cats* initially establishes both the circle motif and the allusion to Greek Tragedy by following the story of Hester Swane as she spirals into desperation and highly destructive madness. Hester's ex-lover, Carthage, has left her and their child, Josie; he is starting a new life by marrying another woman, Caroline Cassidy. Hester is also being paid off and run out by Caroline's father, Xavier Cassidy, and Carthage's mother, Elsie Kilbride, who both hold prejudices against Hester because she comes from a long line of "Tinkers" (gypsy-like travelling people unique to Ireland). Hester, however, refuses to leave despite any and all warning signs. The play opens with an eerie, unsettling conversation (that hints of her death) between Hester and the charming yet ambiguous Ghost Fancier and the Catwoman's prophecy that seals Hester's fate outright. The Catwoman, a mystical clairvoyant residing in the bog, lays Hester's

prophecy before her when she tells Hester of the previous night's dream in which she presided:

Dreamt ya were a black train motorin' through the Bog of Cats and, oh, the scorch
off of this train and it blastin' by and all the bog was dark in your wake, and I had
to run from the burn. Hester Swane, you'll bring this place down by evening.

(Carr 11)

The Catwoman then proceeds to tell her that if she does not leave her home in the bog Hester will indeed die and will take everything down with her. Hester refuses to leave because she does not want to perpetuate the cycle of maternal abandonment within her family. Instead, she holds steady, punishing those who have hurt or abandoned her by burning down Carthage's recently acquired farm. Ultimately, Hester, in the face of unbearable emotional pain decides to take her own life, but not before Josie insists that she goes wherever her mother is going. Giving into guilt and her daughter's pleas, Hester meets her fate as told by The Catwoman, ending her personal cycle of pain and taking her daughter with her.

Spanning across both time and multiple cultures, the circle is the visual embodiment of concepts Hester believes in and wrestles against; the circle— defined by its curvilinear, organic endless line— immediately elicits subconscious feelings of time, eternity, wholeness, perfection, fate, and totality. It also represents the perpetual necessity of birth, growth, decline, and death in the form of life and the cycle of the seasons (Shepard, Shepard 334). In Irish culture, the symbolism of the circle translates into the Celtic knot. Originally used by the Celts as space filler and decoration, the Celtic knot came to symbolize “the interconnectedness of life and eternity” (Aslaksen).

Additionally, the entwined, eternal knots' "constant interlacing" also represented "the physical and the spiritual crossing of paths" (Aslaksen).

The costume design for *By the Bog of Cats* extends the symbolism of the circle (and square as its antithesis) into a visual motif represented by silhouette, which is created through line and shape. In order to translate the mix of Irish-mystical and Greco-Tragedy, the characters who crossed paths with the spiritual (also, then, cognizant of Fate) are draped in soft, curvilinear lines that echo Celtic knots. The Catwoman, for example, the most aware and connected to all worlds, had a costume that was round in shape and created by layered pelts cut into loose, organic variations of an imperfect circle. Her layered skirts were pinned and draped to break their preexisting straight line and to create a more bulbous, ambiguous look. Glistening green cat-eye beads dangle from her pelts, and the purse she kept her dinner (mice) in is also a soft, globular sack. The organically spherical costume for the Catwoman solidifies her numinous status within this world and visually embodies the importance of cycles within the play.

The square, on the other hand represents more tangible objects than the circle, such as Earth, the elements, and the four seasons (Shepard, Shepard 335). Visually, the square is strictly linear, hard, angular, and rigid. As characters step further away from mystical qualities, style lines become harsher and more linear. Inflexible, straight lines silhouette those who are bound by earthly, tangible matters. Because the line of a square is strong and rooted, it easily translated into representing the more settled people in the Bog of Cats, i.e. farmers and townspeople. Historically, fixed inhabitants of Irish towns and villages do not take kindly to "Tinkers" (MacWeeney ix). The term "Tinkers" is a derogatory word derived from the profession of the gypsy-like Irish Travellers; Travellers

were often employed as tinsmiths, and collected scrap metal throughout their journeys (MacWeeney x). Xavier Cassidy is an important and powerful figure within the community. He runs a successful farm (which he hands down to Carthage upon marriage to his daughter, Caroline) and completely rejects the people of the bog; he is more concerned with business, money, and providing for Caroline, his only living child. Xavier wears a simple, solid gray suit, sporting clean-cut (and excruciatingly straight) traditional lines. His pocket square is folded into three sharp angles, as if he were keeping white paper squares safely in his breast pocket. His diamond tie tack is merely a square on its diagonal, and the combination of a vest and tie create harsh angles across his body. In utilizing a silhouette composed of straight lines and steep angles, the costume for Xavier visually establishes his fixed, earthly position within the world of *By the Bog of Cats*.

Although the circle- and the square- shaped basic silhouettes and delegated many minor details within the costumes, they did not directly dictate time period and style for the costume design. Fate and cyclical patterns of life extend past the concept of time; they are in perpetual motion, utilizing time but in no way bound by it. It was imperative that the time period and style for the costume design fundamentally supported the play's timeless core. Alan MacWeeney's mid-twentieth-century photography documenting the lives of Irish Travellers captures a parallel essence and was heavily influential on the costume design for this play. The photography from his study of this outsider culture is timeless in itself. The people he captures are not only stunning, but also extremely soulful and universally human. The Travellers are a provocative, romanticized people who could easily be from the late 1800s as well as the 1980s. Their clothing style mixes

modern pieces with older fashions gathered throughout their travels and handed down over time. In order to recreate such timelessness, the costume design employs garments from several different time periods, many of which were thrifted from vintage clothing shops or pulled from historically organized stock. An excellent example of a costume with patch-worked time periods would be for Carthage Kilbride. Carthage has two looks for the duration of the play, his “farmer look” and his “wedding look.” His farmer look, as the audience first sees him, is compiled of a 1980s down filled vest, a contemporary Henley, 1970s trousers, a 1920s style cap, and classic black Wellington boots that could be from several decades within the twentieth and twenty-first century, whereas his wedding suit is a modern, slick grey suit with a 1960s cut. By mixing and matching time periods to replicate the style found within MacWeeny’s photography of the Irish Travellers, the costume design for *By the Bog of Cat’s* supports the timeless, mystical world of the play.

Marina Carr’s *By the Bog of Cats* is a unique play that equally explores notions of Greek fate and Irish mysticism, mainly the Celtic belief in the cyclical balance and harmony between life and death. The circle is a universal symbol for eternity, perpetual cycles, and totality, whereas the square with a rigid, angular nature represents more tangible concepts such as the Earth and the four seasons. The costume design for this production not only mirrors these themes successfully but also pushes to enhance them by pitting the circle against the square and by adding a dash of agelessness to emulate the Irish Travellers.

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