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*Genus Envy: Nationalities, Identities, and the Performing
Body of Work* (review)

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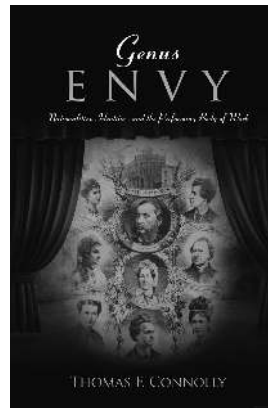
THOMAS F. CONNOLLY

GENUS ENVY:
NATIONALITIES,
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OF WORK

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Amherst, NY: Cambria, 2010. 170 pp.

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Erudite, provocative, and witty, Thomas F. Connolly's new book explores various questions about culture, nation, and identity that arise when performance takes center stage. Performance is part of culture to a postmodernist, of course, not just a window through which it is seen. So it is performances that one should examine to ponder the ironies of trying to stabilize definitions, locations, and genealogies in a fast-changing world. Inspired by postcolonialist Homi Bhabha, Connolly discusses these ironies, which are entertaining as well as fascinating, in six essays dealing respectively with O'Neill's drama, John Mason Brown's dramatic criticism, Micheál Mac Liammóir's founding role at the Gate Theatre in Dublin, the acting career of Alexander Moissi, the Viennese practice of honoring performers with commemorative medals, and the comedy of Noël Coward.

Connolly longs to rescue O'Neill from the biographers and worshipers who have closed him off from the twenty-first century, where he belongs. Critics who refuse to allow O'Neill his "timeless radicalism" (34), he argues, also tend to constrict Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, and others by overpersonalizing their works, a problem compounded by "Method" acting. In O'Neill's case, paradoxically, the playwright who "refused to play the role of citizen playwright" has been elected "Greatest American Dramatist," thus setting in stone his cultural performance as "the artist alone, head down in despair," rather than, as Connolly would have it, "the playwright of the raised fist" (22). For Connolly, O'Neill's career offers a

“definitive repudiation of traditional American bourgeois values” (27). Today, more than ever, audiences need his “dramatic elegies that both lament and chastise” (39).

Dramatic critics, theater administrators, and actors are perennially caught in various middles, culturally speaking. Connolly’s book is rich in historical details that illuminate the vicissitudes of professionals attempting to play these cultural roles. Drama critic John Mason Brown (1900–1969) began his career as a creator of “bourgeois liberal documents consubstantiating good taste and good will” (42) and ended as a cultural consultant to virtually every prestigious institution on the East Coast, though his writing was increasingly limited to his compulsive efforts to write a biography of dramatist Robert E. Sherwood. “Sherwood buried Brown” (62), Connolly concludes from an examination of Brown’s archives, just as Sherwood’s career was deflected from its apparent cultural path when he became a member of the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration. Connolly demonstrates how the business side of journalism and theater play havoc with any attempt to define the role of drama critic. The “relentless downturn” (50) of the newspaper and theater businesses has rendered quaint (and silenced) the charitable liberalism of a John Mason Brown. At the same time, theater people feign indifference to newer, harsher critics who are the only group consistently paying them any attention at all.

Micheál Mac Liammóir began his colorful, devious career by inventing himself as an Irishman (the “real” Michael Willmore, later “Alfred,” was born in London), a persona he colored with gay flamboyance. Mac Liammóir wanted to make the Gate Theatre, which he cofounded with Hilton Edwards, a means to circumvent England and thus to “transform Dublin from a provincial city in the British Isles to a capital city of Europe” (81). Unfortunately, Mac Liammóir’s dream of an Irish-speaking Ireland, which could free itself from a British context, along with the rise of radio, television, and movies, stranded his dream, while his acting reputation also suffered, characterized by John Gielgud and Noël Coward as provincial. Regardless, Connolly reminds us that Mac Liammóir’s performance is ongoing. His theater continues its commitment to the work of Samuel Beckett: the Gate is “still open” (81).

Chapters 4 and 5 puzzle over the intersection of a performer’s reputation and the national culture that may want to claim or disclaim it. Alexander Moissi is a case in point: “Claimed by Albania, Italy, and Austria—sometimes identified as Serbian—no one disputes that he was one of the greatest German-language actors of the twentieth century” (85). Until his wishes were crushed by fascism, Albania’s King Zog hoped to appropriate Moissi as part of the cultural apparatus of a national state. Though others might use

him, however, Moissi believed he was always “playing himself.” His life ended anonymously in a New York hotel room. Connolly also considers the phenomenon of commemorative medals in the context of a performer’s national usefulness. Medals (like glossy photographs movie stars send to fans) commemorate a performer, then become a commodity for collection, then decorate the living space of the fan. They may wind up in a museum, yet performers thus captured are entirely vulnerable to the cruelties of political change.

Connolly is well known to enthusiasts of O’Neill and to fans of Noël Coward as well, being active in the international society of each. Though seemingly polar opposite in style and spirit, for Connolly both playwrights are radical in the broadest sense. Whereas O’Neill dwells upon “the self-hatred of the bourgeoisie,” requiring no less than “the rejection of the family, religion, and the prevailing values of society, and, finally, acceptance only of the individual’s own code” (31–32), Coward accomplishes radical freedom from these forces by staging his own persona in life and by experimenting with ways to make the language of theater a performance of freedom in his plays. Connolly analyzes the dialogue in *Hands Across the Sea*, *Hay Fever*, *Private Lives*, and *Design for Living*, appreciating the craft while contextualizing these works within their historical vicissitudes and the vast variety of Coward’s output.

I have not done service to Connolly’s impressive range of critical reference, nor his feeling for the postmodern project. His bibliography lists 136 sources. And when he says “we postmodernists,” we believe he means it. But Connolly’s book is also rich in close reading, literary history, and original insight. And it is great fun to read.

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