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Interview

Peter Carroll

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Interview

Abstract

Anna Rutherford interviewed Peter Carroll in London in October, 1979, when The Chrzstz(m Brothers was playing at the Riverside Studios.

Peter Carroll

INTERVIEW

Peter Carroll, the Christian Brother — one cannot think of them apart, so completely does he assume the character and the character absorb the actor.

(Eric Braun in *Plays and Players*)

Anna Rutherford interviewed Peter Carroll in London in October, 1979, when *The Christian Brothers* was playing at the Riverside Studios.

Can you say something about the reaction to the play in Australia?

It's been a very popular play with the joy of recognition playing a major role. There hasn't really been any flack from the Christian brothers or the church organizations. Most Christian brothers today are of a younger generation, the play depicts the situation they grew up in but not as it exists now. They actually regard it as a sort of celebration which is interesting. There was of course the instance in Melbourne when Mr Santamaria went to town about it but unfortunately he hadn't read the text. He drew exception to things that were written in a review of the play in which the adoration of the Virgin was wrongly referred to and this got him off on the wrong track. It proved a bonus for the play for it gave it enormous publicity. There have been some older people I have spoken to who have been upset by the play, who see exposed mercilessly that kind of set-up that they sacrificed so much for. But they are really very few and far between.

You said that the younger brothers regarded it as a celebration. In what way?

Your attitude to the play depends very much on your attitude to that system of education. If you think a child being beaten with a strap is a shocking and degrading thing then there's a lot in the play that will shock you. If on the other hand someone getting cuffed over the head is something that happens as a part of life, and remember it was a very working-class community, and the brothers were very working-class people, then it's funny. It's really just what your attitude is to that kind of educational set-up. I think that people who are still in the order, although it's a different set-up today, must admire the brother, otherwise they wouldn't be there.

You've gone through that education yourself haven't you? Do you find it worthwhile celebrating?

Yes I do. I was caned a good deal, but it was just what happened, it didn't worry me unduly and I had a great time imitating various teachers

and obviously storing up impressions which all came back and which stood me in good stead professionally. I don't know that I'd want a child of mine to be caned but I felt that the men who taught me were essentially good men who had my interests at heart and I admired them and liked them very much. I think that what stops them from being brutal is they really did have my interests at heart. They were working-class Catholics and that was exactly my background. So they identified very much with my needs and I think that's more important as opposed to simply hitting someone. In a way it's a form of love.

Coming back to the reaction of the Christian brothers. How about the older ones? Have any of them thought that this was a harsh judgement on them?

I haven't in fact spoken to very many. I gave a performance at the Christian Brothers' school at Lewisham in Sydney, Ron Blair's old school. There were a couple of older brothers there and one of them, with a rather brusque manner, said 'Yes, that's all right, you can say that, but I think I'm going back to write something on the modern system of education which is just a mess, a total mess'. The part they feel is most disturbing is the part that deals with the private doubts of the man because these were things you just weren't supposed to have.

You talked about the joy of recognition on the part of the Australian audiences. How well do you think the play will carry to an audience which doesn't have this recognition?

I think that audience reaction in England has been very different from Australia precisely in that area. Audience response here has been much more subdued and the play has therefore shifted into a darker vein, the personal tragedy of the character has become more pronounced as a result because the comedy isn't as uproarious as in Australia. That's one element that I don't feel communicates as strongly here. The other area is the linguistic register in which it is written; that kind of labour-orientated, church, parliamentarian register of voice in particular (Cardinal Gilroy, Arthur Calwell) for which there is no real equivalent here. The Labour politicians are different in England. So what comes across here is the anxiousness and formality of a classroom technique but not all those subtle shades of vocal resonance that the Australian audience picked up immediately and which delighted them so much.

The reviews here have all been favourable but all they say is related to Catholic education in England and the Irish aspect of it, but the Irish in Australia are such a different kettle of fish as is Catholic education, or was then. What I ask the English audience to do is to wipe out their background and try and view it as if they had this other knowledge which I suppose is impossible.

In a review in Plays and Players Eric Braun writes: 'Carroll's supreme achievement is to show his class the humanity and self-doubt behind the dogmatist; he illumines the good intentions behind the manic behaviour of the Christian Brother.' Do you find the tragedy of the man central to the play?

Yes, I do. I think the play has a hidden nerve. I'm 35 and know so many writers, actors, and directors who have a Catholic background and experience and who have either rejected it wholeheartedly, or partly rejected the form, but who nevertheless can't shake it off in their writing or directing. They have lost their childhood faith and find it a distressing thing in a way. The loneliness that this produces is something which is very central to the play. Ron (Blair) wrote to get it out of his system. He hated his education and it was something he wanted to write about. I think though that he mixed it with a lot of love.

Personally I find very little hate in the play and a lot of love, a celebration in a way.

Well I do too, and it's that area that is very pertinent for people of my age who grew up in the system. In many, many ways it was a very good education system and it was also a political education system, a very idealistic thing in a way. It was working class and the teachers were determined to get those kids into the middle class, into the professions, the public service etc. The ends justified the means. And they succeeded. They created these middle-class people many of whom then turned away from them and that's an enormous tragedy. I think it's misleading to the play and doing it an injustice to think it is just a harsh education system under attack. Another point is that you can't compare it with education today. You have to compare it to state school education of that time which also would have been harsh. And I must say having taught in schools myself I know only too well the incredible frustration if you're faced with 30 or 40 kids who really just don't want to be there. Tremendous.

dous strains were put on the teachers because the class sizes were enormous, 50 in a class was quite normal and it could rise as high as 80. This was because of lack of both teachers and classrooms.

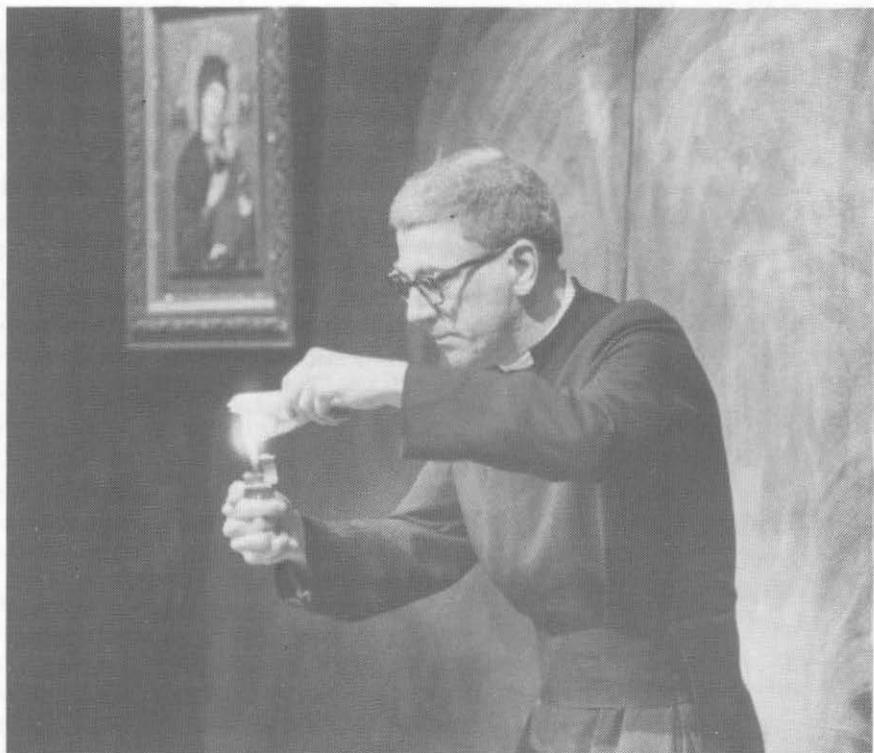
There's been much comment about the ending of the play. Do you have anything to say about this?

It never really worried me in rehearsal. I found it a particularly satisfying part of the play, partly because I was coming to the end and I was very tense about it especially from the memory point of view in the early performances. It always seemed I was breathing a sigh of relief by the time I got to that bit. Although the play isn't naturalistic it sets up naturalistic conventions in the audience's perception that they *are* in a classroom, that the chair *is* the boy. Suddenly when the chair is being painted it's like you're painting the boy and that takes you out of the naturalistic mode altogether. It's an image of education; the whole thing. There's a line just before the ending which says 'I can't educate you, all I can do is give you a primer, an undercoat and then a first coat to be going on with'. Well, I take the blue painting, blue because it's the Virgin's colour, to be the first coat to be going on with. I suppose any education system moulds personality into a specific kind, to give it a specific awareness, a specific view of reality, and that's what I would see the painting of the chair as. It's done in a very soothing, caressing manner which the litany enhances in a beautiful way. It's a whole image of education presented in a surreal moment. I gave a couple of performances in Adelaide before I left to 600 Christian brothers which was a wonderful experience. One of the brothers I talked to said after all the doubts in the play he'd found the acceptance of the brother through the litany and through the calm painting of the chair very encouraging and very helpful. He had himself gone through a crisis and had reached some kind of calm that he felt he was glad about, something that gave a possibility of renewal and something more.

That's one of the things I see, the painting of the chair as a renewal, an acceptance of a fate he can't do anything about, which of course constitutes the tragedy.

Yes. 'You have to wait for the grave.' It's such a hard line, a tough pulling down of the shutters signalling his intention to go on with courage and devotion. Although when he comes to that line we immedi-

ately see Oliver Plunkett's head and body carted all over the continent and England before being returned to Ireland and it's ludicrous. In a funny way it's also magnificent, a magnificent obsession I suppose.



Peter Carroll as the Christian Brother. Photo: Peter Holderness.