Angela Carter – The Undead

Katy Hayes

Librettist

The 25th anniversary of Angela Carter’s death passed last month. The English writer died at the age of 51, leaving behind a body of work that remains unique and unlike the output of any other writer. Her use of language is ornate, challenging, experimental; her creation of story is inventive; her concept of gender is still radical.

Carter was a feminist who often got on the wrong side of feminists. Her bad young women and provocative old girls were full of confidence in their personhood. They strut their stuff in mini-skirts, all legs and lipstick and long hair; utterly feminine and utterly strong. There was not a victim’s bone in the body of her imagination. Her writing reflected a glorious womanly self-possession born of turning twenty in 1960 and feeling the wind of the ’68 revolution at her back.

Three decades ago, I was a young college student, and had published my first two short stories in *In Dublin* magazine and in New Irish Writing (at that time in *The Sunday Tribune*). I was on the hunt for writerly role models; role models who could tell me that my dreams were not pipe-dreams, that my demands for a future as a woman and an artist were attainable. Angela Carter became one of my heroes. I was never stylistically influenced by her work (sub-Angela Carter is not a good look for any writer), but her creative/intellectual engagement with the world as a woman shone like a beacon to my youth and ambition. Her boldness and originality were incendiary. She saw femininity not as a liability but as a weapon. Who else could co-opt the Marquis de Sade to a feminist agenda? Her books were both brilliant and hilarious. “The tiger will never lie down with the lamb; he acknowledges no pact that is not reciprocal. The lamb must learn to run with the tigers.” Was there better advice for a young Irishwoman to hear in the mid 1980s? This was a time when marital rape was perfectly legal in this country. Fifteen-year-old Ann Lovett was found dead in a graveyard, having given birth following a secret pregnancy. This was the Ireland of the Kerry Babies case. The thought of a female president seemed like somebody else’s pipe-dream.

Carter became a well-known name in Ireland following Neil Jordan’s successful, career-making 1984 horror film *The Company of Wolves*, co-written with her and based on her radio play. It was a glorious cinematic representation of Carter’s intellectual furniture: a brave minxish virgin girl; a complicated granny; an ambiguous wolf-man, whose hairiness masks his vulnerability. It felt, for a time, that feminist creativity was entering the main stream.

My own path (through the woods) led to my working as a theatre director, and a further engagement with Carter’s work. I adapted and directed *Vampirella and the Company of Wolves* as a theatre production in the mid 1990s at the Project Arts Centre, for Glasshouse Productions, the feminist theatre company where I was resident director. Alongside the wolfish virgin girl, Little Red Riding Hood, we now had a virgin boy Hero, about to be sacrificed on the alter of erotic vampirism. It remains my favourite of all the shows I directed.

Out of the blue, two years ago, composer Siobhán Cleary invited me to work on a libretto for a new opera based on *Vampirella*. I sought samples of Siobhán’s music to get a sense of her sound, easy now on the internet, and we met. Cleary is like a Carter heroine, trailing music and ideas and intellectual energy. And what better thing to do than to carve Carter’s baroque prose into the soaring emotional highs of opera? Opera, alone amongst the performance arts, has always presented strong women characters – the music demands decent, meaty roles for women’s voices.

This year I taught Carter’s funny and clever last novel *Wise Children* on the MA Programme in Creative Writing in UCD. In this task I was aided by Edmund Gordon’s fine biography *The Invention of Angela Carter* published last autumn, which has brought a great deal of illumination to her posthumous presence. Like the gently-treated vampires you are about to witness on stage, Carter enjoys a significant afterlife. Like the dreaded vampires, her work has an ageless quality. Long live Angela Carter.