

Reviewed by
Debra C. Smith, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Africana Studies Department
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

We have come to expect credible, pedagogic, empirical work from Professor Joanne Kilgour Dowdy. In her previous works, Kilgour Dowdy has explored race, gender, language, literacy, social equality and educational reform. She has accumulated six books and numerous articles, chapters and reviews on her way to becoming a full professor at Kent State University. But, it is in Kilgour Dowdy's most recent book, "In the Public Eye," that she turns the mirror on herself to reveal that the issues that she champions and fertilizes as a scholar are indeed reflective of her performance journey, beginning as a young seedling in Port of Spain, Trinidad.

In 153 pages Kilgour Dowdy takes us through 35 years of life "in the public eye," from beginning formal dance training at the age of 6 at the Caribbean School of Dancing to performing "Between Me and the Lord," an autobiographical play illustrating her life for 40 years which captured the attention of actress Jane Fonda. "In the Public Eye," begins with a 1968 photograph of a pig-tailed Kilgour Dowdy when she was a young girl, opposite an excerpt from "The Good Little Girl," by A. A Milne. Kilgour Dowdy in a ruffled white dress, white socks and white shoes, stands in the forefront of a stage set that features an artistic rendering of a door and a cascading chandelier. Kilgour Dowdy, a bashful smile on her face, looks like she's sharing a secret with the audience. The set is fitting. The door represents the wide open landscape that awaits the young performer while the chandelier is the figurative spotlight on a career that is about to ignite. If one believes I'm reviewing in clichés, you need only to continue turning the pages of the book to appreciate what the opening picture foreshadows. Kilgour Dowdy once told a critic that "She feels compelled to document everything." For that, readers are privileged. "In the Public Eye," documents Kilgour Dowdy's journey as a performer replete with photographs and special memories. The book provides insight into Kilgour Dowdy's acting career in the Banyan Television Workshop beginning at age 16 and is dedicated to the memory of actors she grew up working with, recalling their relationships through prose and picture.

The pages of "In the Public Eye" are flooded with the author's recollections of auditions; rehearsals; Broadway musical numbers with Trinidadian themes; Trinidadian productions; starring as the lead actor in *The Rig*, the first television script by Nobel Prize Winner Derek Walcott; and leaving her beloved Trinidad to attend the Boston Conservatory of Music, Dance and Theater before winning a scholarship to the Juilliard Theater School in New York City. Kilgour Dowdy's own words and corresponding snapshots provide a historical timeline of her continued development in the performance arena. She admits that it's unlikely that she would even remember some of her past productions if not for the photos that bring them back to life for her. That

translates to good fortune for the reader who can observe Kilgour Dowdy in performance and in various emotional continuums - laughing with friends, introspective, serious, embracing the moment – captured in photo. In one picture, she's an "explosion of life, beauty, movement, and drama all rolled into one frame" (Dowdy's own description) when she appeared in King Jab Jab by Felix Edinborough wearing a flouncy red dress and coordinating hair adornment. In another, she's photographed alongside Elaine Brown, a former leader of the Black Panther party.

As for the book's format, after the acknowledgement pages, a table of contents describes the photos and gives photographer credits. Midway through the book, the author shares letters, posters, book launch promotional materials, book covers, and book signing notices. One could illustrate the sections of the book as a whole, by indicating that it encompasses childhood performance, college performance, adult performance, scholar performance, and female performance. Yet, the word "performance" is problematic. What Kilgour Dowdy gives to the reader is not recital, it's real life. "In the Public Eye," is a genuine recollection of the life of a young talented girl leaving a black republic for the United States where she learned to adapt to the alienation of being only one of three black "flys in the buttermilk" at "the Jailyard," an expression which she used to describe Juilliard. Teaching public school in Harlem, earning a Ph.D., and becoming an authority on literacy are just some of the supplementary stories assembled in the memories of Kilgour Dowdy's path to adapting, dealing coping, surviving, choosing and living. Kilgour Dowdy's voice provides colorful, truthful and sincere context for the photos and memorabilia in the book, thereby rendering them significant and relatable for the reader. What appears to be a mere rehearsal is in fact a "grueling rehearsal." A picture of two actors is actually "two foreigners" one from California and one from Trinidad who have bonded in a new city.

Near the end of the book the pig-tailed little girl we met at the beginning of "In the Public Eye," with the demure smile is adorned in a bold autumn orange and red ensemble, and hoop silver earrings, her naturally curly twists graying at the temple. In this picture, her smile is confident, her story told. "In the Public Eye," appropriately ends with a picture of three women. The caption reads "thanks to my first school teachers in Trinidad." Readers will want to express gratitude to them as well for cultivating the artist, performer, scholar and woman who has produced such a prized autobiographical performance. "In the Public Eye" will be of tremendous value and interest to those teaching Africana Studies, Caribbean Studies, Cultural Studies, Liberal Studies, History, Performance Studies, Women's Studies as well as teacher educators and auto-ethnographers.