

The Life

Joanne Kilgour Dowdy

Reviewed By: Yuko Kurahashi

Joanne Kilgour Dowdy's *In the Public Eye* (Commess University Press, 2009) encapsulates her professional life in a series of photos from productions, TV series, rehearsals, and posed shots. Her book conjures up the spirits of many artists and mentors—some of them “no longer on this earth”—who inspired Kilgour Dowdy as an actor, dancer, woman, and educator. The photo captions are both ones created by Kilgour Dowdy for this book and past performance reviews and newspaper articles that include the New York Times, Trinidad Guardian, Weekend Magazine (Trinidad), and college newspapers. With these two different types of narrative, *In the Public Eye* provides the reader with valuable insights into Kilgour Dowdy's journey as an artist in relation to other artists, her community, and her art. By flipping the pages of the book, the reader is invited to take a journey with Kilgour Dowdy from her childhood to the present. The first picture the reader encounters, was taken when Kilgour Dowdy was perhaps nine or ten, reciting a poem by A A Milne, *Have You Been a Good Girl*, as one of the choral reading events at Newtown Girls' RC School in Port-of-Spain. A little pig-tailed girl in a white dress in the photograph is whispering to us, “It's funny how often they say to me, ‘Jane? Have you been a good girl?’” This photo sets the tone for the rest of the book, allowing the reader to ask: Was she a good girl? What happened to this little girl? Did she remain a “good girl?” What did it mean to be a good girl in Trinidad in the 1960s? The reader will soon learn that Kilgour Dowdy took the path of a creative, courageous and perhaps “not so good girl” and later woman. Yet, perhaps one could say, yes, she continued to be a “good girl” but only defined by herself, not a British author or any traditional standard. The next photo is her appearance in the dance version of *Alice Through the Looking Glass* at the Caribbean School of Dancing. Kilgour Dowdy's caption for this picture describes the spiritual beauty that she found in dance when she was seven. “Dance is (a) magical world to me. I become movement... When I dressed up in this costume as a violet, I became a flower and felt that the world was a garden in which I was one of the blossoms” (18). Kilgour Dowdy has nurtured this spirit of dance and the reader learns that it is something she shares in her classroom: “It is no wonder that the headline for the Kent Stater article in March, 2004, read ‘Dancing in the Classroom’” (18). Moving on to her adolescence, photographs show Kilgour Dowdy as a young actress in a television series produced by Banyan Television Productions in T&T. Through the captions of the photos of this section Kilgour Dowdy graciously acknowledges and shares her appreciation for the words and lessons she gained from her involvement with the people she met during this period, including actors Ronald Reid, Lorraine Granderson, Albert LaVeau and many otherwise anonymous people. Referring to a cameraman at the studio, who said to her, “It was the best work that I had ever done up to that point,” Kilgour Dowdy writes: “I don't know where that man is now, but his was the voice that I carried in my head all the way to the Juilliard School in New York.” Thanking Tony Hall, a television director, Kilgour Dowdy describes his impact on her career as an actor. “Thanks to his input, I got the right motivation to sit down and craft my one-woman autobiographical play in 2000,”

she said. The main part of the narrative—newspaper and other articles about Kilgour Dowdy—also serves to take us to different moments of her life. Some narratives eloquently describe Kilgour Dowdy’s change of the focus in her career from acting to education after her graduation from Juilliard in 1987, but with the same level of passion toward her new responsibilities as a teacher. Then this book brings the reader to one of the most important artistic works Kilgour Dowdy created after her career change—a one-woman play entitled *Between Me and The Lord*. The play, written and acted by Kilgour Dowdy (directed by Rhoma Spencer), is dedicated to the memory of the late John Isaacs, Kilgour Dowdy’s close friend and coactor and “consists of four chapters, each with scenes of the highlights from each decade of Dowdy’s life.” In the series of collages or poetry, music, dance, and photography, Kilgour Dowdy portrays her life as a little girl who resisted the cultural norms laid out by Holy Name Convent Secondary School, to a young television/stage actress, to a sojourner in New York City, to a passionate (and compassionate) teacher. Though the book is not able to project her performance piece in a way a DVD could, the combination of the narrative that accompanies the production photos does it justice. Toward the end, the reader will notice how her view of herself becomes more and more communitybased. As a matured “elder,” she is in “granny mode,” seeing herself as a “community mother.” In the Public Eye gives a new look at not only an “émigré” woman in the United States; it teaches us the importance of the reader becoming the “custodian of (the) memories.” The photographs and narrative have the power to ask the reader to reflect on his/her own journey and realise the importance of documenting it in a way that allows both the author and her readers to metaphorically meet, talk, and understand each other.

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