

>> SOUND



Janice Kerbel

Lucy Steeds

Janice Kerbel's radio play, *Nick Silver Can't Sleep*, 2006, was aired on the night that the clocks went back. Listening to it live took little more than 15 minutes: just over a quarter of that hour we borrowed back from British Summer Time.

Kerbel's characters are nocturnal plants, sharing not soil but the gathering hours of darkness. The chief protagonist, Nick Silver (*Nicotiana sylvestris*), knows his star-crossed lover, Cereus Grand (*Selenicereus grandiflorus*), only in his dreams. As he comes to the end of his season, she is on the brink of her one night of blossoming for the year. In between them comes a wild evergreen vine named Moonbeam (*Ipomoea alba*), both entwining and invasive, lulling Silver and summoning Grand. Meanwhile, a chorus of other night-bloomers echo and elaborate the hero's longing for dawn, for sleep.

Kerbel's script stays clear of the insomnia of romantic imagination; Silver is far from manically alert, lacking the fevered creativity that burns the midnight oil. The poetry of the lusty tug towards sleep is also largely set aside and what we hear is the banal language of frustration, the intrusive chatter of noisy thoughts which quieten as we begin to drop off, yet all too often spring back to force us on, withholding what is sought. If sleep forms a community of dreamers then those left unluckily awake live their sleeplessness alone. The play presents their desire to join in, give in, to be similarly overcome. Their sighs evoke numbness and desiccation: the fug and haze of the hyporeal world entered once the miraculous habit of falling asleep has been lost. Soothing vocal tones – also deep-trance hypnosis, visualisation techniques and the other strategies that Silver recounts – can only coax and court, not command, its return.

I have always appreciated the pared-back sparsity of Kerbel's work and I did almost wish that the fine actors here assembled were a little less fine, their voices a little less splendid. I would be interested to hear the same lines

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delivered by those unaccustomed to speaking poetry, or committed to the monotony and tedium of prolonged restraint. However, since the bare text stripped away much of the routine magic conjured by 'the moon', 'stars', 'dew' and 'dreams', maybe the rich vocal interpretation conveyed the longing of the characters, their desire to cross from prosaic reality into the poetry of dreaming. It certainly casts a narcotic spell, while wallowing in the bathos of the more leaden puns of floral anthropomorphism.

The botanical metaphor at the heart of *Nick Silver Can't Sleep* is both captivating and complicated. The silent stasis and slow creep of plants is used to invoke the resolute self-presence and relentless consciousness of someone unable to sleep. At the same time, the visual display and heady scent of flowers – denied us by the audio format of Kerbel's work, of course – hold all the promise of the most potent of dreams. Yet to bloom, in this context, is to be wakeful and it is the nocturnal plant varieties and, more particularly still, their distinct nightly patterns of bloom and droop, which we here encounter as various personality types and various sorts of insomnia. Kerbel's personifications not only dramatise the shared drives in our lives – the vital interplay of the wild and cultivated, for example, or the physiological and intellectual – but they also allow for individual differences, while productively confusing definitions of the normal and pathological.

In a manner that is typical of Kerbel's practice, *Nick Silver Can't Sleep* builds upon the rigours of extensive research, not only academic investigation into the relevant botanical and biomedical fields but also extended interviews with insomniacs recruited via an advert in the *Evening Stan-*

dard. In bringing this material together, the play then encourages us to flex our visual imaginations with the most minimal of prompting. While previous works by Kerbel have implicitly traded upon, say, the filmic thrills of a bank heist, or the tall tales of desert islands, the popular delights that underpin this play come first perhaps from poetry: the wealth of imagery available in English verse alone might suggest the witching time of night, midsummer dreaming and the nightingale as muse. The honed, modest script of this short piece is reminiscent of the meticulous sobriety of Kerbel's quasi-technical drawings and, like these, it manages to evolve in the receptive mind, developing all the multicoloured swing and melodious ring of some full-blown escapist entertainment.

No longer subsumed by the radio programme that reduced it to one magazine entry among others, *Nick Silver Can't Sleep* now has an ongoing, twilight presence on the web, where it awaits your connection. An unwitting taunt to those who turn to it in the desolation of unwelcome wakefulness, it apparently lasts about as long as it normally takes to fall asleep. Or perhaps – and no doubt as intended for this select audience – those mellifluous tones will work their soporific charm. ■

Nick Silver Can't Sleep by Janice Kerbel was commissioned by Artangel Interaction for its Nights of London series. It was co-produced and broadcast by BBC Radio 3's *The Verb* and directed by Ariane Koek. It is accessible at www.nicksilvercantsleep.org.uk.

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