

Artangel/BBC Radio 3, UK

It is a constant source of frustration that UK broadcasting networks rarely apply even their more obscure channels, stations or programmes to the task of creating or disseminating art works. Arts programmes are generally confined to documentary coverage and critical commentary, or a guest spot by an artist with something about to launch or open. The plethora of extant radio stations represents a wasted opportunity for the transmission of audio work, especially as the medium has such a hard time finding outlets even in galleries, owing to its often ungainly or intrusive presentation.

Of the larger radio stations, BBC Radio 3 presents the most serious and substantial arts coverage, and even the occasional art work. The weekly programme *Between the Ears* recently broadcast Peter Blake's *Mystery Tour* (2006), an audio montage of a journey through the venerable Blake's selection of cultural icons, from Kim Novak to Ian Dury. But even more surprising was the literature and spoken word programme 'The Verb' hosting Janice Kerbel's radio play, *Nick Silver Can't Sleep* (2006). The piece was commissioned by Artangel, who have a pedigree of working with national broadcasters, but still it was fantastic to hear work by a contemporary UK-based artist on national radio who: a) wasn't a yBa; and b) was presenting a new piece and not simply promoting something else off-air.

Kerbel's play is part of the Artangel interactive project 'Because the Night', which delves into the London night, encountering those who haunt it and who support its skeletal infrastructure. For *Nick Silver Can't Sleep* Kerbel has combined previous research into plants – plans for improbable gardens that could flourish in launderettes, for instance – with new investigations into the experiences of insomniacs. The play's central characters, Nick Silver, Cereus Grand and Moonbeam, are amalgamations of anthropomorphized nocturnal plants and real testaments of the perennially sleepless. The script, read by Rufus Sewell, Fiona Shaw and Josette Simon, is delivered in the husky, soporific tone of the semi-recumbent, and wavers between the erotic and narcotic. The language is fecund without tipping into floridity, and the narrative so simple as to be almost indistinct among the slow poetry of the spoken word. The play was directed by Ariane Koek, and, although I experienced the not uncommon problem of differentiating one character from another in a radio play (I remember once not being able to differentiate between Sherlock Holmes and Moriarty, and still wonder which one it was that went over the cliff edge), Kerbel's mesmeric script, with its interjections from a chorus of three other voices, is so full of *non sequiturs* that its fragmentary nature remains inviolate nonetheless.

The play is, in essence, a classic love story: Nick Silver is awake (or, in his plant capacity, in

blooming) all night and wilts by day; he longs for sleep so that he may return to a dream he once had of Cereus Grand, a 'seven-ribbed, double-jointed, long-legged wonder [...] my radiating golden-tipped vespertine queen'. Moonbeam also wakes at night and remembers a past encounter with the enigmatic Cereus. The two speak of their memories, aspirations and complaints without seeming to hear one another, or even Cereus Grand approaching. She is an exotic clambering rainforest cactus that flowers for just one night each year, and she reaches Nick just as he falls asleep at last.

Themes of longing and remembrance brought to the sub-animal realm of plants are infused with an inertia that a mammalian rendition might have found impossible. The emasculation of plants, their geological roots and independence from

community creates a strange range of qualities for a literary character. Sensory atmospherics are introduced by spoken memories dripping with aroma and studded with colour. Any progression in the piece is brought about entirely by description, rather than by dramatic or dialogical relationships, and perhaps this is what distinguishes *Nick Silver Can't Sleep* from the majority of radio plays; Kerbel, untrained in the standard theatrical forms, ignores the constraints of dramatic tension and platitudinous resolution. *Nick Silver Can't Sleep* is more of a study than a play, putting language and imagery before action. It is a study of relationships to time, letting it spill and contract abstractly, as it does during the night, instead of compacting it into the formal, episodic chunks of the radio programme.

Sally O'Reilly



Janice Kerbel  
*Nicotiana glauca*, the  
night-scented plant on  
whose habits Kerbel bases  
the lead character of her  
play, *Nick Silver Can't Sleep*.  
Image from J.S. Dakers,  
*Annuals for Garden  
and Greenhouse*, 1951  
2006

# Janice Kerbel