RAY COMISKY went to Derry to attend a rehearsal by the Field Day Company of Tom Kilroy's new play "Double Cross" about Brendan Bracken and William Joyce, better known as Lord Haw-Haw.

TWO IRISHMEN who were, to varying degrees, at the centre of events during the second World War are the subject of an intriguing new play by Tom Kilroy, which is now in rehearsal by the Field Day Company in Derry, where it will open on Wednesday, January 12th. One is Brendan Bracken, who died of throat cancer in a London hospital in 1958. The other is William Joyce, better known as Lord Haw Haw, who was executed as a traitor by the British in 1946.

They present, in a particularly fascinating way, almost two sides of the same coin. Bracken was a Conservative, a close friend of Winston Churchill, who became his Parliamentary Private Secretary when Churchill was made Prime Minister in 1940. The following year Churchill made him Minister for Information, where he was mainly responsible for propaganda and the BBC. Both before and after the war, Bracken made a name for himself as a journalist and he was, to all intents and purposes, an integral part of British society.

Joyce was born in New York of English and Irish parents. The family moved to Ireland when he was three, and strongly pro-British, later settled in England where he eventually applied for a British passport. But his politics, coloured by Fascism and hatred of Jews and blacks, led him to Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists and, finally, to side with Germany in the war. He became a leading light in Goebbels' propaganda machine, where his sneering "Jairmany Calling, Jairmany Calling" was beamed in radio broadcasts to Britain during the conflict.

The two Irishmen thus found themselves on opposite sides in curiously similar roles. Each was involved in propaganda — the creation of images and impressions, and playing roles; one was designed to uphold British society as its authorities wanted it upheld; the other was designed to pull that society down.

It's a fascinating situation which gives all sorts of resonances to the title of the play. Both Bracken and Joyce had their own crosses to bear, and being Irish and outsiders in a British society where they sought acceptance, of double-crossing their own origins in this pursuit and, in Joyce's case, of double-crossing Britain by siding with Germany. And in much of this they were two sides of the same coin.
Ireland calling...

THE latest Irish literary ploy - to hit the stage comes from the Field Day Theatre Company of Derry, and it is guaranteed controversy by attacking the value of nationalism.

Field Day has made itself responsible for plays and pamphlets about politics in Ireland since it was founded in 1980. Its new play, Double Cross, is at the Royal Court for a month, after a successful Irish tour. It presents two very British Irishmen - Lord Haw Haw (William Joyce) and Brendan Bracken, both major propagandists during the war, one a master of misinformation working with Goebbels; the other, a personal Minister of Information and a cronie of Churchill.

Both were essentially the same kind of man, says Thomas Kilroy, whose first play this is for Field Day. And he has Stephen Rea take both parts in his play, in which the bustling Bracken in the first section (the second section of Double Cross concentrates on Lord Haw Haw win Berlin) that comes out fully.

Professor Kilroy adds Bracken has created an "elusive disguise which is breached at several points in the play. Eventually, his neurosis is stripped away, and underneath all the urbane, is this vicious little racist. Bracken could be accused of that, too."

As for the need the two public figures had to conceal their pasts, and their easy acceptance in Britain - Joyce flirted with the Tory Party before joining Mosley's British Union of Fascists; Bracken was a Tory MP who tried to marry into the nobility - Kilroy offers this: Britain liked its colonial subjects to turn themselves into Britons and was flattered when colonial countries reproduced the features of the mother culture.

Bracken is shown in the play as taking the imitation so far as getting his mistress to dress up as a boy scout while he fondles her. There's rather a lot about sex; Joyce is demented by sexual jealousy when his wife has an affair with a German officer. Indeed, acts of personal and patriotic betrayal litter Double Cross.

In this, Kilroy links up with a principal theme, in Field Day's didactic contribution to the debate on Ireland. The company still regards Brian Friels's Translations, which inaugurated its activities, as its central text. That play was about the Ormonde Squire's map making in Donegal in the 1830s, when English placenames were substituted for Gaelic; the imperial overwriting of the native map, you might say.

InTranslations, there is conflict between the Gaelic-speaking world of the hedge schools and the National (English-speaking) education system; between the traditional and the new. And change is seen, in a peculiar and poignant Irish way, as always a betrayal. As to why this should be so, Professor Kilroy says: "We never had the luxury of evolution. When modernity was coming into existence, it was an occupied place. Even today, there are aspects of Irish culture which are pre-modern."

Part of that traditionalism involves hanging on to old ideas about national identity, as a sort of security. In its five brief years, Derry-based Field Day has been accused of being too nationalist in its artistic outlook. Double Cross offers something controversially different. Stephen Rea says: "I think the play defines us more than anything we've done since Translations."

"It shatters the idea of nationalism completely. It says that nationalism is absurd. Isn't that right, Tom?" Kilroy adds this confirmation: "Certainly, at the simplest level of labelling people as English or Irish, I have great difficulty with the division of people into nation states at this stage of human history."

Any exaggerated notion of nationalism/patriotism has its dangers, and these are extrapolated in the careers of both Bracken and Joyce: the ultimate traitor is the ultimate traitor. Professor Kilroy says: "I think a traitor has to have a profound loyalty to the state. Joyce and Bracken were both nationalists of that kind."

That's something that Little Englanders need to think about: relevant to Little Irishmen - North and South - who've been to see Double Cross in droves, as well.
THE Irish psyche is having a great airing in the theatre this week. The Irish identity and heritage, the British legacy and the meaning of treason are alive and well at the Gate and the Abbey.

"Double Cross" by Tom Kilroy, at the Gate, which deals with Brendan Bracken and Lord Haw-Haw, is a Field Day production. The words Field Day are engraved on its heart. Since the production of Brian Friel's "Translations" in 1979 Field Day, in theatrical productions and in a series of pamphlets, and in the individual writings of its members such as Seamus Deane and Tom Paulin, has been much preoccupied with the post-colonial world we have inherited, Ireland's English question, our relationship with the English language.

"Double Cross" is tailor-made. It is as though Kilroy wrote it with Seamus Deane looking over one shoulder and Tom Paulin looking over the other. It is eloquent, full of recondite references, aphorisms (some of which are not as good as they try to be), political wisdoms and soliloquies.

The drama arises from the conflict between certain ideas, the use of Bracken and Haw-Haw to evoke the Englishman in us all, the conflict between the relationship between the slave and the master, the coloniser and the colonised in a dance of dislocation, at first racial and cultural and then personal and sexual.

Heady stuff, no you. Try touring that around the country. It would go down a bomb in Carick-on-Suir on a Saturday night, they'd love the long speeches about how the victim imitates his oppressor. Franz Fanon rules okay.

What saves the play from its own ideas and what makes these ideas accessible and somewhat dramatic for an audience is the performance of Stephen Rea as both Bracken and Haw-Haw.

I first saw the play in Armagh two months ago. The sheer quality, power, commitment and virtuosity of Rea's performance, then as now, kept the audience involved. This was helped considerably by the use of film which made Bracken and Haw-Haw come together on the stage, played by the same actor, who could look both of them and talk like both of them. Kate O'Toole and Richard Howard played all the other roles and, in certain respects, the magic of the three actors made the play of ideas seem less difficult.

Rea's Bracken is more vivid than his Haw-Haw. The accent is paced, each vowel sound is forced and exaggerated, each word is enervated and distorted. It is a mockery of the authority and certainty of the English accent, containing, as well, however, traces of a South African accent.

So that when his mask falls him, when the accent falls down and his own accent, his Irish vowel sounds, come into play you are aware of the tragedy of his situation, his fate as a member of a condemned race who has made the ultimate sacrifice; the loss of identity. This section, the most powerful in the play, has been successfully rewritten by Kilroy.

Haw-Haw seems weaker on second viewing not as a character — neither figure is written or performed as a full-blooded man you love or feel sorry for — but as a version of the plight of the colonised. We never see him broadcasting, which instantly removes his whole power. We do see him, however, as a dead ringer for Francis Hardy in Brian Friel's "Faith Healer," aware of the mystery of his own guilt, at odds with his wife and his friend and, in the end, renouncing chance.

If "Double Cross" takes its bearings from certain

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THEATRES: Colm Toibin

Stephen Rea in "Double Cross" at the Gate.

Bethlehem. Attitudes hardened and changed very quickly.

As early as 1962 Thomas Kinsella had mocked the legacy of the heroes of the Rising in a poem called "A Country Walk". "I came upon the sombre monuments / That bear their names: McDonagh & McBride / Merchants; Connelly's Commercial Arms . . . "

Almost ten years later, Leonard goes much further. His play is a farce, wonderfully constructed, extremely funny. It is also a vicious satire on our relationship with the past, full of savage mockery of what we believed we hold dear. The speech of Hoollhan (Godfrey Quigley), who took part in the Rising is still powerful and sharp. Leonard is preoccupied with capitalism, as Field Day is with colonialism. (In the unlikely event of them ever getting together God knows what they would produce.)

It is difficult to know what to do with "The Patrick Pearse Motel" in 1986. Brian de Salvo, the director, has chosen to play it as a trip down memory lane, a period piece where we can all twist again like we did last summer with sixties costumes, beautifully done by John Bergin and sixties decor.

In doing so he has taken all the harm out of the play, knocked the satire stone dead, transformed a brilliantly clever piece of savagery into a great night out. The issues raised in the play are still deeply relevant and important, the small amount of re-writing could have sharpened its edges.

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