

MOTHER AND CHILD DELIVER REAL DRAMA

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Dylan Coburn Gray's play *Absent the Wrong* tells the stories of 70 years of Irish adoptees. Veronica Coburn, Dylan's mum and the play's director, has an emotional stake in this story, she tells *Pavel Barter*

When she was growing up Veronica Coburn knew she was adopted. She did not feel a sense of loss and had no desire to search for her birth family. It was only when she had Dylan, her child, in 1991 that she began to ask difficult questions. "I looked at him and thought, 'He looks like me,'" she says. "It was the first time I thought, 'How do I look like?' That was the start of it. I think I had to learn there was a loss. That doesn't mean you invent it. You have to realise what loss is."

Veronica and Dylan Coburn Gray, in his early thirties, are in the back of a café in Dublin, on a lunch break during rehearsals for their new play. They have an easy rapport as mother and son and as director and playwright. This is far from their first collaborative rodeo, but it is the first time they have worked together with Dylan's sister, Caoimhe Coburn Gray. Because there are so many people in the rehearsal room, having a cast of 10 doesn't feel like we could just be our own room. It's a bit of family project," Veronica reasons. Dylan adds: "I've worked with other art families who are not in the rehearsal room. We're not close in a way where we have to like each other as the adults do."

Absent the Wrong charts the paths of 70 years of Irish adoptees who are looking for answers. "The preoccupations

of the show came from real conversations with people, but it was important not to simply put anyone's biography on stage," the playwright explains. Because of their own family history, however, he and his mother have an emotional stake in this story.

The play originated after *Citysong*, Dylan's Abbey show, won him awards and offered the opportunity to write to commission. Instead he wanted to explore collaborative avenues of art: "A process in which I could meet people who I wasn't in a dialogue with. I told people, 'I'd love to chat to you about a big show about the adoption system and I would like Veronica to direct it.' They said: 'We'll get back to you on that.'"

Undeterred, he started working on it himself. *Absent the Wrong* was devised in part as a response to the Mothers and Baby Homes report. "I read the big state documents, if only to be able to pick more fights with the government," Dylan says. "Although the ethos of the show is devotional rather than documentarian."

The play was then developed in collaboration with its cast, which includes Noelle Brown, an adoption rights activist who was born in Bessborough Mother and Baby Home in Cork and is an established actor and playwright. Dylan was interested in exploring lives in which adoption intersects with race: a person born of mixed race, for example, who may have an

Theatrical family Veronica Coburn and Dylan Coburn Gray

absent parent and struggles with lost identity. A large cast allowed him to explore the vast breadth of adoption stories and illustrate how no two lives are alike. "They can be so different. Everyone's experience is idiosyncratic," he says.

His mother's story is a case in point. Finding her birth mother was straightforward, but the nugget of information she learnt about her father transformed the playing field. "I discovered in my thirties that I am biracial," Veronica says. "My father was Chinese. It took me a long time to feel I could say I am Irish-Asian, because when you grow up for the first 35 years of your life not knowing, you can't suddenly get a piece of information and say, 'This is what I am.'"

Teasing out similar emotional territories in *Absent the Wrong* feels cathartic for the director, "because adoption isn't about one story, it's about complexity and multiplicity." She pauses. "I can't make work that I don't care

about. I've never been a jobbing director. There's a personal investment in me in making a piece of work that is publicly engaging and built on identity, absence and loss."

Veronica Coburn's career as a writer, performer and director began in the 1980s, when she acted in plays such as Graham Reid's *Callers*. Dylan, whose father, Ciarán Gray, is a dance practitioner, was born immersed in the arts. He remembers going to New Zealand with his mother and Barabbas, the theatre group she founded with Raymond Keane and Mikel Murfi, for a production of *The Whiteheaded Boy* when he was eight years old in 2000. "We were in a big theatre in Wellington," Veronica says. "There was loads of space backstage. Every evening when I came off stage Dylan was always asleep. So you'd get this sleepy little thing, sticking him in a taxi and go back to the hotel."

Her son developed a love for the practice that he describes as sacred and sanct: "For me, it has always occupied the closest thing to a liturgical function in my life." Nevertheless, he did veer off this preordained path by studying music at college. "Your parents ever shape how you rebel against them? I find it quite funny to look back and think that, for me, the furthest possible rebellion I could think of was to become a music teacher." He and his mother laugh. "So I did try to run away from the circus, but I never got near finance."

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Veronica realised her son had his own distinctive artistic voice when she saw his first play, *Boys and Girls*, in 2013. "As a young person Dylan was always interested and curious. I remember when Dylan wrote *Boys and Girls* and we went to see it. The awful thing about being a parent is you just want them to be OK." When she saw *Boys and Girls*, she thought: "This is better than OK."

After a string of award-winning productions, the playwright is now mentioned in the same breath as the socially conscious Irish writers Mark O'Halloran and Emmet Kirwan. He is also remarkably prolific. This summer Irish National Opera staged his co-written one-act youth opera, *Horse Ape Bird*, and two of his works are being staged at the Dublin Fringe Festival: *Wake*, by This Is Pop Baby, alongside *Absent the Wrong*.

Just as Veronica had Barabbas, Dylan has his own theatre company in collaboration with others: Malaprop. His mother's influences do not end there. Veronica was always proudest of her plays made in conjunction with communities. As artistic director of Home Theatre (Ireland), she conducted 30 stories from Dublin 15 in 30 homes. "I do a lot of participatory work," she says. "I like interacting with people who are not professional artists."

"I operate on the same ethos as my mother," Dylan adds. "There's a lot of youth theatre DNA in *Absent the Wrong*. My foundational question, and I borrow a lot from Veronica here, is: 'Who is the play for?' It would be wrong for me to make it without the people who are directly affected [by adoption]." In this instance his mother is a participant as well as director.

Did she resolve those difficult questions about her birth parents? "I've met my birth mother. She's lovely. I don't see her very often. That's fine. I don't know who my father is. I don't have a name for my father. My father was Chinese. If I had a name, if I could see a face... I would give a lot for that. I can't wrap that up in a tidy sentence."

Dylan adds: "The only official piece of written information we had to go on about my grandfather was that he was small and dark. What a fantastically useless level of information – just enough to keep you guessing and not enough to get to anywhere. These small things that are funny on one level assume the dimensions of tragedy when you think about all the repercussions that come from them."

Absent the Wrong is a passion project for this mother-and-son team. They describe it as a play about a painful subject that is created with love. "We want to articulate something about suffering," Dylan says with a smile, "but we don't want people to suffer in doing so." ☐

Absent the Wrong, Dublin Fringe Festival, Abbey Theatre, from Sat to Sep 24; fringefest.com