

# **Playwrights' workshops of the Scottish Society of Playwrights, the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, and their long term impact in the UK**

Ian Brown

## **Introduction**

In recent years important studies of the growing role of dramaturgs in new play development in Britain have been published. Such studies by Mary Luckhurst (2006)<sup>1</sup> and by Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt (2008)<sup>2</sup> have set out a clear historical and cultural context for the establishment of such posts, often under the title of Literary Manager. Yet, although Luckhurst notes 'An equally important part of the changes in the national development culture is the significance of the regional new playwriting organisations' (201), both these significant studies, despite their many virtues, omit a key element since the early 1970s of support in Britain for new playwriting. That is the role of the Scottish Society of Playwrights (SSP) and its development of playwrights' workshops in the period 1974-85 based on the example of the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center. The ways in which playwrights' workshops as discussed in this article operate is neatly summarised by Scott T Cummings as projects 'where a new play can be read and rehearsed under laboratory conditions and the playwright can try out on-the-spot revisions or collect information for possible rewrites'.<sup>3</sup>

Both Luckhurst (209) and Turner and Behrndt (8, 109) mention the role of the O'Neill in passing. This article, however, contends that the O'Neill had a central – though for now apparently neglected – position in the development of new attitudes to play development and fresh approaches to dramaturgy in Britain. Further, this influence was primarily mediated through the example of the SSP playwrights' workshops launched in 1974 under the direct inspiration of the O'Neill. Luckhurst observes, with regard to North West Playwrights, founded in 1982, that it pioneered the short-term hire of dramaturgs in pre-rehearsal periods and rehearsal periods specifically to tutor playwrights in stagecraft and to mediate between director and playwright. The primary influence was the post-Brechtian idea of the production dramaturg, but the model found to be most useful was a new writing theatre, the O'Neill Centre [*sic*], in the United States. (208-9)

This observation is true in so far as it goes, but it occludes important intervening development. As we shall see, any post-Brechtian influence was not primary, but indirect, channelled through the impact on the O'Neill of Martin Esslin, while the route through which the O'Neill helped shape North West Playwrights Workshop, as it was originally called, was primarily and specifically the SSP workshops of the 1970s. (A clue to this influence lies in North West Playwrights' original title.)

This article addresses this lacuna in the record, drawing in part on the author's own role in both the SSP and North West Playwrights' Workshop. It considers the long-term impact of the SSP workshops, seen as a second-generation development out of the O'Neill, and their influence on what this article describes as third- and fourth-generation versions of the O'Neill model. It provides a record of the early work of both institutions and demonstrates the influence in the United Kingdom of the SSP workshops on subsequent playwright and play development projects both north and south of the Border. It demonstrates that the long-term influence of the SSP workshops and, through those, the Eugene O'Neill Center has been extensive, covering all parts of the UK, developing the work of many significant playwrights.

While over four decades changes in practice have emerged, it is still clear that contemporary playwright development programmes in the UK owe a considerable debt to pioneering work in the 1970s in Scotland, inspired by the American example.

### Developing the model

George White established the Eugene O'Neill Center's National Playwrights Conference in 1965, and was founding President until standing down in 2000.<sup>4</sup> The first conference was simply a weeklong chance in May for playwrights to meet directors and other theatre professionals to discuss issues round new theatre writing. It arose from a sense new playwriting in the USA was not then finding necessary support: playwrights were expected to fit into a play-doctoring process whose prime model was Broadway. As Susan Jonas and Geoff Proehl observe of this period

Just as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing took issue with the taste of his contemporary audience [...] so was there a consensus in the sixties in America that the public deserved better fare than it was currently offered.<sup>5</sup>

Although Off-Off Broadway was developing and offered some room for new writing and theatrical experiment, White considered no US theatre had an open-ended national new writing role like England's Royal Court. In the late 1950s at the Royal Court, George Devine had initiated writers' workshops, 'which were doubtless much influenced by the traditions established by Michel St Denis. [...] These workshops were important in the development of work by Arden, Wesker, Bond, Ann Jellicoe and others.' There is, however a clear difference between the approach of the English Stage Company workshops and those of the American, Scottish and later English playwrights' workshops discussed in this paper:

the former explored various forms of theatrical technique (e.g. the use of masks, improvisation, physical rather than verbal expression, etc.) in an attempt to stimulate new creative processes on the part of writers, *before* their plays took shape, while the work of the playwrights' workshops seems to have begun largely *after* the draft of a finished script had been submitted.<sup>6</sup>

White's vision grew then out of a desire not so much directly to develop playwrights as artists as by the desire to develop their craft through the exploration of their playscripts in a professional context. Indeed, as we shall see, this vision, first outlined at the 1965 conference, developed over a period of three years, with the added insight gained on the arrival of Lloyd Richards in 1968. White always believed that his own large country needed a national centre with a role parallel to that of the Royal Court, though with a distinctive philosophy. His initiative was to have a far-reaching and deep influence on the development of thinking and practice about new play development worldwide and, through the workshop activities of the SSP, especially in Britain.

White is native to Waterford, Connecticut, the Center's base. Waterford adjoins New London, where the O'Neill summer home, Monte Cristo Cottage, inspired the events of *A Long Day's Journey into Night*. A Yale Drama School graduate, he had since 1955 acted and directed in Italy and the USA and from 1963 worked in film. Learning the local Hammond mansion, overlooking the original scene of *Moon for the Misbegotten*, was to be burned in a fire-brigade training exercise, he persuaded the local council to save it. Here he founded the Center, dominating, with its outbuildings, a long grassy slope down to Long Island Sound. Five years of conversions made the complex a cunningly designed theatre campus: a barn

became – naturally – the Barn Theatre; in an L-shaped declivity between two outbuildings White created the Amphitheater; in 1968, with baseball bleachers, his designers created the outdoors Instant Theater. The mansion's ground floor became offices and the Center's restaurant, while upper floors and outbuildings provided a library, more offices and accommodation. Later, other buildings provided television and film studios. Very soon various other creative and developmental theatrical programmes, like the US National Theatre of the Deaf in 1966, appeared on-site. Ernest Schier founded the US National Critics Institute (NCI) in 1968 with support from another newspaper critic, Norman Nadel. Schier was long-time theatre critic of the *Philadelphia Bulletin* and became, even before his retirement from that post, the long-serving Director of the NCI. He was a highly influential figure in the theatre of that age, the last significant critic to review shows being tried out, in the practice of the period, on tour in their final manifestation (traditionally presented in Philadelphia) before they might appear on Broadway – or not, according to his verdict. In 1970 the O'Neill added the US National Theater Institute, an intensive undergraduate skills-development programme; the National Musical Theatre Conference appeared in 1978; subsequently programmes in Puppetry and Cabaret emerged. The Center retained its focus on the playwright but expanded around that theatre art into other theatrical disciplines. Creativity, however, remained as its core principle, as George White has discussed in a detailed description of the first decade's events.<sup>7</sup>

The emphasis on creativity and the central concern with the development of the play as an expression of the playwright's vision rather than a commercial product for Broadway exploitation grew out of the experience of the Center's first three years. The second Conference comprised stagings of new plays by playwrights from the first conference and this model continued with a more open selection process in 1967 when a *New York Times* headline called the O'Neill, 'Try-out Town USA'.<sup>8</sup> The term 'try-out' implied that the O'Neill was becoming perceived as a static version of the pre-Broadway tour on whose outcome Schier was so influential. The danger was that the National Playwrights' Conference would become simply a showcase rather than a visionary developmental process for playwrights and their work. This danger was averted, however, and the Center's future direction as a development programme for plays and playwrights rather than a try-out venue was settled in 1968 when Lloyd Richards became Artistic Director, holding that post until 1999. Already established on Broadway, Richards had directed *inter alia* the première of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). An influential theatre figure with an interest in, and proven skill in working with, new writing, he was to become between 1979 and 1991 Dean of Yale School of Drama, whose School of Dramaturgy had been founded in 1977, and Director of Yale Rep.

In 1984, Richards described the shape of the four-week programme he had created in July/August each year:

Over the years a multi-stepped process has evolved that begins with the annual selection of 12 to 18 projects from 1,750 scripts submitted. The selected playwrights come together in May [...] for a Pre-Conference Weekend [...] reading their plays to the other writers and to the artistic staff [...]. After this reading the playwright, director and Artistic Director discuss the nature of re-writes that could improve the script [...] and the form and nature of presentation the piece will have [...]. For the Conference itself for four or five days we add talented actors and a dramaturg [...].<sup>9</sup>

The plays had two staged readings – script in hand, using a stylised set made up of abstract modules designed by Peter Larkin and only as much lighting as was necessary for scene-setting – with an audience of general public and theatre

professionals, resident and visiting. On the morning after the second performance, playwright, director, dramaturg and Artistic Director discussed with Conference members at a Conference Critique the play's problems and how they were dealt with in rehearsal, its strengths and its presentation, and what had been learned from the workshop process. Thereafter, playwrights stayed on till the Conference finished, in Richards's words, 'free to digest the experience, to discuss the work further with all present, to rewrite, and to assist in the O'Neill process as it happens to other writers'.

The theatrical context of the developmental values of this process marked it out from both the university sector's analytical-critical approach and a professional theatre's then product-driven agenda. Its emphasis was clearly on professionals working together to develop individual playwriting skills and dramatic understanding. Play-as-product, of course, might emerge. The emphasis here, however, is on process, how plays are written to express best their author's vision, while facilitating actors and other theatre professionals to interpret them and encouraging those actors and others to explore and discuss with the playwrights the nature of the text with which they are working. Playwrights learn not to be isolated nor simply doctor scripts. They learn how playwriting can work harmoniously as part of the range of theatre professions. The original O'Neill model placed a premium on close theatrical – not literary – critique and practical engagement.

White and Richards's model provided support for playwrights and new play development in a form that until then had not existed nationally. Its essence was that playwrights should enter the theatrical process, not stand outside it. Their presence from the beginning of the O'Neill process, when they met other selected playwrights and the creative team at the Pre-Conference Weekend each May, was aimed at helping them be open to the positive potential of professional input from other theatre artists. The primary creative role of the playwright was respected. It was also, however, important in the O'Neill process that playwrights should be helped to learn to understand the collaborative nature of theatre. They were encouraged not to be defensive, but to listen constructively to what other professionals have to offer, while maintaining their ability to sustain their own playwriting vision. The O'Neill system created this opportunity by allowing them to engage with actors and directors of the highest quality so that plays could have the best opportunity to be revealed and understood on their own terms. Playwrights were not simply writers whose work had been optioned and who were not welcome in the rehearsal room. Rather they were, once their play was selected, part of the open process by which their plays were prepared for presentation at the Playwrights' Conference. They would find themselves as part of a team working to develop their play, not as providers of a body of text that other professionals would take away from them and develop in a separate room. The impetus was not the urge to produce an immediately saleable script, but the opportunity to explore the potential of both play and playwright.

To safeguard this, an O'Neill house rule was that no contract discussions could take place on campus during the Conference. (Though by the late 1970s such was the O'Neill's reputation that it was thought that between selection and arrival at the Conference most plays would be optioned.) Richards's standing meant that not only were leading directors attracted, but special Equity arrangements allowed Broadway actors to work with O'Neill playwrights so that the latter had the benefit of working with artists of a very high quality indeed. Actors of the calibre of Meryl Streep, Michael Douglas and Swoosie Kurtz have worked on new plays at the O'Neill. The Center's determination to support developing writers was wrapped in the desire to provide the best possible casts in 'a safe place', a phrase Richards often used,

## Experts and exports

Richards's O'Neill process sought to cherish playwrights in a US theatre ambience that until then had seemed in general focused on exploiting them commercially, often through the try-out process already mentioned, rather than helping them find their individual creative and theatrical 'voice'. On the basis of my discussions over thirty years (1974-2004) with White and Richards and O'Neill directors, playwrights, casts and critics,<sup>10</sup> it seems to me that the emphasis on development and nurturing underlies and explains four aspects of that process, marking its innovative nature. These are creative competition, pre-Conference discussion, dramaturgs and critique.

Firstly, the open submission process sought to ensure as wide a range of playwrights as feasible was considered. Every script, by definition unsolicited, was professionally read and sifted, though Richards, as Artistic Director – and one with particular experience of developing young playwrights and spotting rising talent – always retained the right to nominate a small number. In this way he could avoid the possibly levelling impact of a professional sifting process. Indeed the identification of August Wilson, who began as a poet, as a major playwriting talent was very much to the credit of Richards and explains why Wilson came to entrust so many of his plays to Richards for their first performances.

Secondly, those playwrights selected met the O'Neill creative team, exploring their plays to the other playwrights in the creative crucible of the Pre-Conference Weekend already described. Here they left the 'garret', joining theatrical creativity's interactive nature in an environment away from imminent rehearsal and production pressures.

Thirdly, each writer and director had a dramaturg attached to the play as a 'critical friend', a deeply experienced theatre professional who was used to assisting plays evolve. This person could stand between playwright and director – and playwright and cast – in a neutral position explaining each to the other as necessary, and sympathetically but rigorously offering dispassionate advice. In 1967 there had been a difficult session at the O'Neill when playwrights and critics fell out publicly and one playwright even – rather theatrically – waved a pistol around.<sup>11</sup> George White sought to find a way of transmuting such hostile relations into something both creative and productive. As Geoffrey S Proehl notes, 'The O'Neill record [...] reveals an ongoing and significant attempt to work out the role of the critic/dramaturg within the production process'<sup>12</sup> and 1969 saw the first use of dramaturgs. The term was employed on the advice of Martin Esslin, then Head of BBC Radio Drama and recently author of the widely influential *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1962). Esslin was also author of *Brecht: A Choice of Evils* (1959) and deeply influenced by his own central European background, bringing to his practice the sort of mainland European and specifically German dramaturgic traditions that Luckhurst and Turner and Behrndt discuss in their studies. Other dramaturgs brought their own deep experience of playmaking, though from a non-European perspective. These included Edith Oliver, *The New Yorker* Off-Broadway Critic, Arthur Ballet, founder of the Office of Advanced Drama Research, Minneapolis, a Ford Foundation-funded programme that linked new plays and their playwrights to suitable producing theatres, and Dale Wasserman, playwright of *Man of La Mancha* and a major screen-writer. The Richards/White vision saw such figures as critical to supporting playwright development. As Turner and Behrndt observe,

[...] the American dramaturg continues, in many contexts, to be closely associated with new writing, partly because of the previous legacy of literary management and partly because significant early employment of dramaturgs

took place at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, with an emphasis on developing new North American work. (8)

Finally, at the hour-long Critique, actors, directors, playwrights, visiting professionals and conference workers offered responses and insights, in open discussion. Each participant who spoke offered the playwright a personal response to their work whether as performer, fellow artist or audience member in an environment intended to stimulate the playwright to consider how further the play might be developed before its professional première. Sometimes contributions were, inevitably, shallow, but at least as often, given the calibre of those participating in the O'Neill, the feedback was thoughtful and valuable. Some playwrights found this unnerving: in 1974 both Lucky Gold and Albert Innaurato expressed to the author deep anxiety about participating in the Critique. In a later year, the author saw one playwright, having at first refused to attend at all, turn up in a taxi halfway through the Critique – but at least he did turn up. The experience could indeed challenge; just as often it rewarded, helping ensure playwrights benefited from wide and committed feedback on the play's reception. Playwrights learned of their play's impact, positive and negative, and where it perhaps failed or had unexpected outcomes.

White, an expert fundraiser, sustained this complex and demanding process over the decades and the O'Neill's contribution to the modern repertoire, not only in the US, is significant, supporting the development of major playwrights like Israel Horowitz, John Guare, Lanford Wilson, Thomas Babe, Wendy Wasserstein and David Henry Hwang. As already noted, it was particularly instrumental, under Lloyd Richards's guidance, in developing and foregrounding August Wilson's dramatic writing and the growth of his ten-play *Pittsburgh Cycle*. The Center spotted coming, but unfashionable, talent: a significant text like Martin Sherman's *Bent* appeared to have had difficulty in its time finding a mainstage; after development at the 1978 O'Neill it reached both West End and Broadway within a year. It is, of course, conceivable that some of these writers and their plays might have broken through without the benefit of the O'Neill. The Playwrights' Conference, however, appears to have been critically important in encouraging the eventual production of *Bent* and essential to the emergence of Wilson as a major playwright – indeed as a playwright at all. For the others mentioned in this paragraph, the developmental process certainly gave time to explore their talent. It seems certain that at least some would not have had the space, given purely commercial pressures, to enlarge their talents and establish themselves as they have. Without the O'Neill's input modern American drama would be significantly the poorer.

The O'Neill model was highly influential, working through its impact on visiting professionals and White and Richards's missionary work. For example, an Australian National Playwrights Conference began in 1973 with White as guest administrator and Richards attending with several O'Neill personnel. Dale Wasserman founded and directed the Midwest Playwrights Laboratory in Madison, Wisconsin. Other O'Neill-derived programmes were established in Sweden, Canada, the Caribbean, and China, and later in Italy, from 1991 to 1997, under Nicoletta Gaida, who visited Waterford in 1989, as the Dionysia World Festival of Contemporary Theatre. The model went beyond theatre. White influenced Robert Redford's 1981 foundation of the Sundance Institute in Utah so much that he became founding Chairman. O'Neill values and process continue to be represented in Sundance's operation as its current mission statement demonstrates when it concludes:

Through its programs, the Institute seeks to discover, support, and inspire independent film and theatre artists from the United States and around the world, and to introduce audiences to their new work.<sup>13</sup>

The post-O'Neill emphasis on sustaining individual artists is clear.

The National Playwrights' Conference continues, though after Lloyd Richards's long service several artistic directors have come and gone. The dramaturg's role is now that of the less-authoritative 'mentor', while the Critique has been abandoned as too challenging for some. Time modifies all models, but this withdrawal from critical openness and weakening of the dramaturg's role may have reduced some of Richards's creative toughness. Nonetheless, the O'Neill still nurtures playwrights' craft.

### **Scottish Society of Playwrights workshops**

The impetus for playwrights' workshops in the UK arose from a visit the present author made as SSP Chair to the O'Neill in 1974 supported by the Scottish Arts Council (SAC). John Faulkner, then SAC Drama Director, who had first attended the O'Neill in 1973, instigated and accompanied the visit, which aimed to see what lessons one could learn for the establishment in Scotland of a similar process, one upon which the SSP had already resolved. That visit inspired many developments within and furth of Scotland.

There were several reasons, grounded in a sense of creative vacuum and the isolation of individual artists, that a Scotland-based O'Neill-influenced project interested Scottish playwrights. Firstly, in 1960s Scotland much theatre-writing talent seemed dormant, with no clear way to find performance. There was neither, as there was in England, a Royal Court, a Theatre Royal Stratford nor a National Theatre, each in their different ways with a remit to develop new writing. The 1950s energy of Glasgow Citizen's and Edinburgh Gateway in producing new work seemed to have lost its drive. This was despite the fact that the Citizen's in the 1960s produced premières of Stewart Conn's first stage play *Breakdown* (1961), John Arden's *Armstrong's Last Goodnight* (1964) and Peter Nichols's *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg* (1967). It seemed that in the 1960s, unlike the situation derived from Devine's energy at the Royal Court and its impact on the rest of English theatre, there was a certain ennui about new writing for the Scottish stage. It seemed directors would not usually risk, or develop, plays not yet fully ready for the stage, however able their younger writers. This was despite the fact that, following the appointment of John Holmstrom by Peter Hall at the RSC in 1961 and the later appointment of Kenneth Tynan to the National Theatre in 1963 in dramaturgic roles, both Glasgow Citizens under Michael Blakemore and Michael Meacham and the Royal Lyceum under Clive Perry appointed literary managers in the late 1960s. The former was Tony Paterson and the latter Alan Brown, himself a playwright and actor. When Giles Havergal arrived at the Citizens in 1969, he soon dispensed with Paterson who went on to become literary manager at Pitlochry Festival Theatre through most of the 1970s. At the Lyceum, after a gap when Brown moved on, Stewart Conn, then also a leading director for BBC Scotland Drama, became 'Literary Adviser' from 1973 to 1975. Mary Luckhurst appears to date the first successors to Tynan in England to a later period:

Two other flagship theatres followed suit first, the Royal Court employing a Literary Manager in 1979, and the Royal Shakespeare Company employing Colin Chambers in 1981. (200)

In fact, Colin Chambers himself has observed that he was actually serving such a function from 1979 although on short-term contracts and followed a more or less continuous series of such appointments after Holmstrom's appointment in 1961-63. These included Martin Esslin (1963-4), Jeremy Brooks, the first to be entitled 'Literary Manager' (1964-71/2), Ronald Bryden (1972-76) and Walter Donohue (1976/7-1980).<sup>14</sup>

Yet, despite such appointments, SSP members were not entirely certain that these new roles were serving them or their development as playwrights. The feeling at the time was that, as Terry McCabe put it in 2001,

The real-life hitch is that dramaturgs work for directors. [...] Dramaturgs are hired by not-for-profit theatre run by artistic directors who each want an artistic staff that will work to support, not contradict, the type of theatre the artistic director wishes to pursue.<sup>15</sup>

However unfairly, that was then a general view and the SSP's development of playwrights' workshops was intended to provide a dispassionate system of play development uninfluenced by individual theatre companies' artistic policies. Indeed, such was the distrust then of the dramaturg's role, the SSP chose, in a departure from O'Neill practice, not to use them, rather having the play develop through the interaction of playwright, director and cast. SSP workshops were seen as establishing an innovative and independent new playwriting initiative and the Society attracted SAC funding in the first year of workshops of £10,000, a considerable sum at the time, to support what was seen as a flagship new-writing project. (Although the Traverse is now thought of as a new-writing theatre, and it did support some new writing in its first decade, 1963-73, it did not firmly establish itself as primarily a new writing theatre until Chris Parr's regime in the second half of the 1970s.)

A second factor leading to the development of the SSP workshops was a sense, which lay behind the SSP's 1973 foundation, that, if playwrights would come together and co-operate, they might resolve common issues and create shared opportunities. An SSP project drawing on the O'Neill, then, would help develop writers, and show actors and directors how writers cope with dramaturgical problems. Not only that, it would incidentally demonstrate that playwrights, at the time often seen by directors as marginal and other-worldly, were as effective entrepreneurial organisers as any other theatre-workers.

The most important reason, however, was simply that the Society felt new work must be encouraged if theatre was to develop. The first shoots of what was later called the Scottish theatrical renaissance, of which the SSP was to become an important part, were beginning to show. Stewart Conn's *The Burning* (1971), Bill Bryden's *Willie Rough* (1972) and the present author's *Carnegie* (1973) had all, for example, appeared at Edinburgh's Royal Lyceum Theatre. Meanwhile, in late 1972, Stephen MacDonald had arrived to direct a series of new writing seasons at Dundee Rep and then, from 1976 to 1979, at the Royal Lyceum, that has become legendary.<sup>16</sup> In 1973, 7:84 (Scotland) was set up, premièring John McGrath's *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black Black Oil*. The development of the SSP workshops can be seen, then, to have catalysed, and participated in, a broader revitalisation.

Clearly the O'Neill four-week model would not be affordable in Scotland even with SAC support: the UK fundraising and charitable-giving regimes alone were not sympathetic to the very large scale of the US operation. In any case, Scotland's scale scarcely required the US residential model. The SSP decided that, if it could identify the O'Neill's strengths for the Scottish context, then on that basis it should develop its own model. One of the first adaptations was to drop the word 'Conference', which suggested something less active than actually occurred at the O'Neill, adopting the term 'Playwrights' Workshop'. 'Workshops' as a description and activity attracted the Society for a number of reasons. They take place away from the pressures inherent in rehearsals leading to full production: a play's development for its own qualities is paramount with no need to 'fix' it for opening night, while leaving fundamental flaws

hidden rather than resolved. Workshop processes allow writers to develop not only the play, but skills as a stage writer. Further, the work happens in a context where actors' and directors' concerns are with the play, not their own opening performance. Finally, the process allows new work, not yet fully production-ready, to be appropriately reworked at reasonable cost, or even found not susceptible to rewriting.

The initial Scottish process involved presentations in both Edinburgh and Glasgow, using professional actors and directors, after five days of workshops. These approximated to a first rehearsal week where rewriting is often done and the process of text exploration, before actors begin to firm their interpretations, is usually most intense. As in the O'Neill, script-in-hand presentation was critical: it removed the need to memorise lines so energies could concentrate on script development and reminded everyone this was not a 'production'. For similar reasons, as at the O'Neill, both lighting and set were as vestigial as was reconcilable with meaning. At the start of the presentation, the audience was reminded that they were not watching a 'product' but a 'process'. (Lloyd Richards employed a deliberately formulaic speech to this end throughout his directorship, coming on stage before presentations, describing the process, drawing attention to Larkin's stylised set modules and thanking the playwright for her or his play). For logistic reasons, in Scotland audience critique happened straight after the second presentation rather than on the following morning.

Such was this event's success in the autumn of 1974 that, when local government reforms set up Lothian Region, it sponsored a similar regional workshop in the early summer of 1975. These first workshops led to the discovery and development of two unproduced one-act plays, *Walkies Time for a Black Poodle* and *Towards Evening*, by Ena Lamont Stewart, then much neglected. The SSP then raised funds to present a season of workshoped plays including both of Lamont Stewart's in full production at the Netherbow Theatre in Edinburgh in late 1975. As a follow-up experiment in 1976, Alasdair Skinner, the SSP Council member with particular responsibility for leading the development of all these projects, organised, with strong SSP and SAC backing, a residential workshop at Newbattle Abbey, just south of Edinburgh. Here, not only were there four-day workshop sessions, but leading theatre figures led seminars on theatre topics and one-day workshops explored plays not ready for full workshop. Again a number of plays drew directors' attention and either went on to full production or theatres commissioned new work by their writers. Through such processes, for example, writers like Donald Campbell and plays like his *The Jesuit* (1976) were supported. At the end of this two-year development period, the SSP undertook stocktaking of lessons learned and achievements. The conclusions were that workshops were valuable and effective ways of developing new talent – and the new work of established writers – but questions arose over the best way to carry on. The peripatetic, Edinburgh-and-Glasgow, model seemed strenuous and wasteful of energy. The Netherbow full production season, despite its success in rehabilitating Lamont Stewart as a produced playwright, seemed to take the process away from, and sell short, its initial developmental impulse, and for a result not different in kind from work being produced regularly by then at the Traverse. Although both the production season and Newbattle had balanced their budgets, their nature and extended scale had been a distracting drain on energies and finances and the latter's residential model seemed expensive for Scotland where people did not truly need to stay overnight.

The development of workshops based ultimately on the O'Neill model found new forms in Scotland out of the first SSP experiences. What emerged – and there was always local evolution – was a second-generation model of workshops responding as suitable scripts appeared and under SSP patronage. Charles Hart,

professional Administrator of the SSP (1978-85), observes SSP workshops 'were inspired by the O'Neill Centre [*sic*] methods and ethos, but we of course experimented with different ways of working and presentation over the years'.<sup>17</sup> These might be in Edinburgh or Glasgow as convenient. In Edinburgh a separate SSP-supported organisation, Edinburgh Playwrights' Workshop, came to be established. Meantime in the late 1970s Pitlochry Festival Theatre's *Plays in Progress* series, under Tony Paterson's tutelage, followed the SSP example. Other activities complemented SSP workshops, led by an Administrator, firstly Linda Haase (1975-78) then Hart, including script advisory and reproduction services, publication of important out-of-print texts and the *SSP Newsletter* which became *Scottish Theatre News* (1981-87). Hart, alongside work at the SSP's Otago Street premises, developed collaborations with the Third Eye Centre and Perth, Dundee Rep, Edinburgh Netherbow and Glasgow Mitchell Theatres. Of these, Hart notes 'Television drama producers [Leonard White and Robert Love] were more serious at scouting for talent than their theatre counterparts [finding] many of the writers they used via the SSP'.<sup>18</sup> SSP playwrights' workshops and their second-generation imitators were clearly an important element in the new dramatic ecology of Scotland by the early 1980s.

This continued until 1984-5 when SAC, whose cuts in Scotland echoed those following the English *Glory of the Garden* report, discontinued support for SSP activities, suggesting company-based workshops were more 'efficient'. (So-called 'support organisations' were an often-forgotten victim of both sets of cuts at that time.) In fact no company continued workshops when the SSP, chaired again by the present author (1984-7), became the more exclusively representative and lobbying organisation it has been since. Even the independently-funded Glasgow-based Writers and Actors Workshops set up in 1983 by Hart and Denis Agnew, with Tron Theatre support, lasted only until 1987. Part of the SSP's appeal against the funding cut was that it was highly efficient and that in time SAC would find it necessary to reinvent the SSP's workshop and support facilities. Meantime, a significant part of SSP funding was reallocated to establish the Scottish Literary Manager post held for many years by Tom McGrath. Here, workshops and the dramaturgic role were set in effect in opposition.

### ***Playwrights: An Endangered Species* unto the fourth generation**

Drawing on the O'Neill experience, SSP workshops, under playwright leadership, had a long-term impact in Scotland on perceptions of the need to support new playwriting. They also directly impinged on how new play development has grown in England over the last three decades. One can date precisely the genesis of this process. In November 1982, the Theatre Writers' Union (TWU) held a major conference in Manchester, *Playwrights: An Endangered Species?*, which discussed evidence about the position of playwriting in England and ideas for ways forward. There the present author offered a paper: 'Playwrights' Workshops in Scotland and the USA'.

This paper led directly to the establishment under my convenorship of North West Playwrights Workshop (NWPW) with such Manchester TWU branch members as Peter Flannery and Alan Kay on its committee. This was supported – financially by North West Arts and the Arts Council of Great Britain and morally by TWU's Manchester branch – explicitly to workshop on the SSP model. An important NWPW third-generation development, however, was the involvement of theatre directors in NWPW as committee members and workshop directors. This had not been possible in the second-generation Scottish model, given the SSP focus on playwrights' management, but grew from the first-generation O'Neill model. These directors

included Richard Williams of Contact, Howard Lloyd-Lewis of the Library Theatre and David Thacker of Duke's Playhouse, Lancaster. Thus, local theatre companies had a direct interest in the potential of workshopped plays. TWU, meantime, did not have the SSP's development role, funded as it had been for this purpose by SAC between 1974 and 1985. TWU was strictly a representative union, never in a position to sustain play-development as the SSP had, and NWPW was independent of it. When later offshoots emerged, therefore, they arose from individual playwright initiatives, but, emulating NWPW, often with direct support from Arts Council or Regional Arts Association/Board drama officers.

In July 1983 NWPW presented its first season, two out of six plays going on to full production, and in time such playwrights as David Simpson, Charlotte Keatley and Paul Abbott, now better known for creating the television series *Shameless* (2004-) benefited from NWPW processes. (The 1983 launch in some sense reflected a strong interest in the region in the delivery of new approaches to playwriting development. In 1982 at Crewe and Alsager College – now part of Manchester Metropolitan University – I established within Drama Studies and Creative Arts degrees one of the first undergraduate playwriting courses in the UK.) Manchester and Lancaster hosted the first workshops, in an attempt at regional solidarity. Because of problems similar to those experienced with peripatetic work in Scotland, they thereafter found one base, initially Manchester's Contact Theatre. In 1984 an expanded NWPW workshopped twelve plays, some in four-day and some in one-day formats. To support the exploratory and developmental role the O'Neill so advocates, NWPW in this second year invited Peter Flannery to act as dramaturg, an O'Neill role not really used in Scotland, save in 1976 at Newbattle. This role became one that thereafter was retained – usually, but not always – in the third-generation models. As early as 1988, NWPW received the Horniman Award for Outstanding Services to Theatre at the *Manchester Evening News* Theatre Awards and since then has continued its service to Northwest playwriting, now entitled 'North West Playwrights'. The Horniman Award represented recognition by the wider theatre community of the significance of the NWPW which, following the SSP model, had opened new territory and methodology in play development for English theatre. This influence continues even to the present moment. As the following extract from its current website shows, the fourth-generation North West Playwrights still embodies values and methods clearly derived through the third-generation NWPW and second-generation SSP workshops from the first-generation O'Neill model:

North West Playwrights is an independent organisation which develops and promotes new writing for theatre. [...] All plays submitted to the Script Reading Service receive feedback, and outstanding pieces are selected for development through the Workshop Programme, whereby selected writers have the opportunity to develop their scripts with professional directors, actors and dramaturgs. [...] NWP mounts classes and workshops in writing skills, and collaborates with theatre companies and other bodies to provide a range of development opportunities.<sup>19</sup>

The third-generation (NWPW) model meantime spread widely throughout England, helped by the presence of Charles Hart in a new role as ACGB/ACE New Writing officer (1989-2006). Yorkshire Playwrights (now the fourth-generation Script Yorkshire), for example, was founded soon after – and modelled on – NWPW. Its current activities include:

- Developing craft skills by talks, lectures, workshops and showcases,
- Disseminating information via our newsletter, e-bulletin, online discussion group and website,

- Creating links between writers, directors, actors and producing organisations,
- Hosting special events and projects.<sup>20</sup>

Covering the rest of England, other O'Neill- and SSP-derived organisations at the time of writing include New Writing North, Script Midlands (in Birmingham), East Midlands Theatre Writing Partnership, Menagerie (in East Anglia), New Writing South, and South West Theatre Writing Network.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile in Belfast, Tinderbox as a new writing company 'has an all year programme providing dramaturgical support and processes for writers, theatre workers and other artists exploring theatre as a medium'<sup>22</sup> which draw on SSP-style workshops. In Scotland, the parallel organisation is Playwrights Studio Scotland whose genesis provides an illuminating example of both the far-reaching influence of the 1970s pioneers and the tendency for wheel-reinvention in cultural policy circles and arts-funding cycles.

While all these organisations' historical development, self-description and activities show clear descent through the SSP from the O'Neill, it may be doubted how many are fully aware of their lineage. As has been noted already, two major recent studies of dramaturgy make no reference to the SSP playwrights' workshops' existence or influence. One thing is sure, though: their continuing prevalence shows professional playwrights still find playwrights' workshops' development and support mechanisms artistically sustaining. Were this not the case, workshops would simply disappear, not, as they do, continue to evolve. The 1974 launch by the SSP of playwrights' workshops has been a major influence on the processes of new play development throughout the UK over the last thirty years.

### **Back to the future**

As noted earlier, the SSP from its foundation in 1973 not only planned and ran playwrights' and play-development workshops, but a script advisory service, publishing and script-reproduction services for playwrights and a topical theatre journal. After 1984-85, much of the funding for this went to a national Literary Director post, held from its inception by Tom McGrath. Based in, but independent of, the Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh, he was highly effective and popular. Not only a distinguished poet, playwright, musician and translator, his engagement with new writing helped develop many young playwrights' talent throughout Scotland. By 2000, however, questions arose whether this model was still working to best advantage. In particular, SAC's 1984 assertion that workshops held by theatre companies would be 'more effective' was unsupported by events. They had not happened by the late 1990s: theatres focused on their direct production needs, not playwright development (although the Traverse did run open evenings once a month where writers might have scripts read). Meantime, the SSP continued representing playwrights, negotiating, for example, alongside the Writers' Guild and TWU, the 1986 TMA playwrights' agreement, in the early 1990s leading a strike that led to better conditions for playwrights north of the Border, and in 2000-1 producing a *Directory of Scottish Playwrights*. Its function, based on members' subscription income, however, was not as the wide-ranging playwright-led development group it was until SAC withdrew funding. As predicted in 1984, it had become necessary to 'reinvent' the SSP's development programmes – or at least find ways of fulfilling their functions by other means.

Nikki Axford, SAC Drama Officer, led this process in 2000. She produced an options appraisal of possible ways playwriting development might be reorganised, drawing on a reallocation of the funding of Tom McGrath's post.<sup>23</sup> McGrath himself was fully involved in this process which led to further consultations over the next two years. SAC employed Faith Liddell, former Director of the Edinburgh Book Festival,

to lead further consultation with playwrights, theatre companies and educational institutions.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, a small group that included the Drama Director David Taylor (Axford having moved on in 2001 to become Chief Executive of Pitlochry Festival Theatre), McGrath, Philip Howard of the Traverse Theatre, and, from the SSP, Peter Arnott and myself met regularly to consider ways forward. Out of these discussions, where the example of the SSP's pre-1985 and the O'Neill's long-time work was always on the table, emerged Playwrights' Studio Scotland in 2004. Its aims were defined as:

Delivering our mission to directly engage the people of Scotland with new playwriting [by improving access to plays, identifying new talent and increasing the number of new plays produced].

Responding to our mission to raise the standard of plays for presentation to the public [by developing the quality of new plays, developing playwrights' skills and experience, and making best use of the existing skills, experience and contacts of the sector].<sup>25</sup>

These aims are clearly generationally related to the Studio's Scottish and US predecessors. Under its first Creative Director until 2011 Julie Ellen (and with Tom McGrath its Director Emeritus until his death in 2009) and its new Creative Director Fiona Sturgeon Shea, the Studio has worked constructively with playwrights. In a final ironic turn of the gyre, it currently hosts SSP Council Glasgow meetings.

Meantime, the Performing Arts Labs (PAL) at Bore Place, Kent, is directly linked to the O'Neill first-generation model. In 1986, John Faulkner, by then a senior manager at the Royal National Theatre, introduced, as he had me, an acquaintance, Susan Benn, to the National Playwrights Conference. Benn is an American artist who, having studied at the Royal College of Art and the Courtauld Institute in London, was a textile designer in Scotland and Paris in the 1960s. Her interests in the arts are, however, cross-disciplinary and she became a publisher of children's books in London and New York in the 1970s and early 1980s and worked as a reportage photographer in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>26</sup> Meeting George White, she recognised the O'Neill model's wider potential. Since its foundation the O'Neill, retaining its focus on theatrical arts, had expanded, as noted earlier, beyond playwrights, critics and students to include programmes on music theatre, puppetry, and cabaret. Benn's inspiration was that this model might work across artform boundaries and she became PAL's founder-director. As a resource, she had access to a site on a farm in Kent 35 minutes from London with barns converted into studios and residential accommodation. At first she considered establishing a British Playwrights' Conference. She consulted, however, a number of advisers including the present author who counselled that, given organisations like the SSP and North West Playwrights Workshop had developed and generated playwrights' workshops adapted to UK conditions, it might be better to develop her residential model in other ways.

PAL was launched in 1989: Benn invited me to be director of the first such Lab as a pilot, aimed at finding a different way of nurturing, in the first place, playwrights. Working with Alan Drury and Yvonne Brewster as mentors, that first Lab ran for a week in the summer. Just under a dozen participants, several of whom, including Winsome Pinnock, Mark Ravenhill and Polly Teale, went on to substantial careers in theatre, worked with professional actors on their own script ideas each day. In the morning, playwrights had master-classes intended to open up their vision. Artists from other genres like choreographer Stuart Hopps, mime Toby Sedgwick, composer Pete Moser, designer Caroline Beaver and director Michael Attenborough led these. Clearly this model was less about playtexts than individual artistic

development and stimulation, working with others in a creatively interactive environment. Though it worked from the O'Neill model, that first PAL workshop might be seen to parallel the Devine Royal Court practices of the 1950s, although it had developed its format through quite different pathways. And PAL aimed to work across a far wider range of artforms than either the O'Neill/SSP or the Royal Court models. By 2003 Benn could observe

A track record of award winning achievements has helped to make it possible for PAL to continually invent new forms and to grow from the first pilot lab for Playwrights in 1989 (with a Gulbenkian Foundation grant of 15,000 GBP) to an average of 8 to 10 labs a year supported by an income of 700,000 GBP in 2002/3. Rigorous evaluation of the results over a period of months and sometimes years, provides a sound basis for future policy and practice.<sup>27</sup>

PAL, though clearly related to other O'Neill-influenced workshops, has found its own pathway, perhaps most simply summarised in one of its current aims: 'nurturing cross disciplinary talents in a safe, non-prescriptive but professionally challenging rigorous environment'.

This formulation surely draws on Lloyd Richards's emphasis on providing a 'safe place' for playwrights to extend their art. His vision and George White's have been highly influential and internationally widespread. It is possible to discern, especially in the US, the danger of a 'workshop culture': some playwrights locked in a hardworking, but circular, process, rewriting from workshop to workshop, a theatrical version of film's 'development hell'. The danger there is of overwriting, so that, as one playwright said to Charles Hart, 'all the colour is taken out'.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, the achievements of playwrights' workshops and the list of playwrights they have developed since 1965 are very substantial. Their current UK-wide distribution demonstrates they are still seen to offer Lloyd Richards's 'safe place' where playwrights are taken seriously, make contacts and develop.

## Conclusion

The vision of George White enhanced by the theatrical richness of Lloyd Richards's artistic and pedagogic insight continues to support a wide-ranging and often high-profile international professional network of theatrically-focused playwriting development programmes. Their influence, with an incalculably broad and profound impact, extends beyond theatre to such major creative phenomena as Sundance and the Performing Arts Labs. For four decades playwrights' workshops have been one of the foundations of new playwriting in the UK and abroad. Without them, the play-doctoring product-driven 'fix-it' models of the 1960s with their general lack of interest in developing the craft and art of playwriting, that still prevail in some purely commercial contexts, might presumably even now constrain playwrights. The founders' achievement is deep, lasting and to be honoured. But it is also true that without the SSP's work in the 1970s it is hard to see how the O'Neill's influence, at least within the UK, could have been so widespread.

Widely-prevailing developments out of the practice of playwrights' workshops based on the SSP model include:

- acceptance by playwrights that the production of a playtext is part of a collaborative process;
- the perception that directors should work with playwrights to develop a play's qualities without resort to hierarchical assertions of authority and vice versa;

- the conception of playwriting as an evolving skill, not simply the result of innate talent;
- acceptance of the role of the dramaturg in helping produce the finished play, where the role of the dramaturg and workshopping of scripts is often now seen as crucial;
- the recognition of the importance of the general health of playwriting for the health of the theatre at large.

These developments do raise, of course, a number of countervailing considerations including the danger of over-development of scripts so that they lose their original impulse and possible new kinds of conflict between the role of the playwright as originator and the dramaturg as developer of new scripts. Although not a topic addressed in this article, there may also be occasions of conflict between dramaturg and performers in the workshop process where, before, such conflict might tend to lie directly between playwright and actor. Nonetheless, it is clear from the range of fourth-generation activities to be found that workshops and the related role of dramaturgs have become generally accepted aspects of contemporary UK new play development.

The SSP workshops developed a version of the O'Neill model acclimatised to British theatrical conditions and through a process of experimentation tested that version in a variety of ways in the period 1974-76. Thus it could be confident that it had developed a robust model suited to UK practices. The fact of the historical influence and significance of SSP playwrights' workshops is not the only evidence of their success. That is also discernible in the way that the open-minded creativity they sought to nurture is embedded in the processes of the fourth-generation manifestations this article has identified. These show just the flexibility of approach and concern with the changing creative needs of playwrights that the original O'Neill model nurtured.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Luckhurst, *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Cathy Turner and Synne K. Behrndt, *Dramaturgy and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Scott T Cummings, 'Garden or Ghetto?: The Paradox of New Play Development' in Susan Jonas, Geoff Proehl and Michael Lupu (eds.), *Dramaturgy in American Theater: A Source Book* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1997), pp. 378-9.

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to George White for reading and commenting on drafts of this paper. It is dedicated to him, Charles Hart and the memory of Lloyd Richards.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Jonas and Geoff Proehl, 'Preface', in Jonas, Proehl and Lupu, p. viii.

<sup>6</sup> This discussion of Devine's workshops is indebted to the comments of one of the anonymous reader's reviewers of this article and makes use of examples provided in feedback to the author. I am most grateful to the reader for reminding me of the importance of Devine's parallel but different initiative in playwright development.

<sup>7</sup> George White, 'The O'Neill Experience', *Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. IV No 15. (August-October 1974), pp.32-54.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted by White, p.34.

<sup>9</sup> Lloyd Richards, 'The U.S. National Playwrights Conference', *BTI/DATEC Reports*, Issue no 5 (September 1984), p.1.

<sup>10</sup> The author attended the Playwright's Conference in 1974, 1977, 1979, 1982, 1984, 1989, 1993, 1998 and 2004, participating also in the work of National Critics Institute in all but the

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first of those years. He also tutored in the National Theater Institute on four occasions in 1987-90.

<sup>11</sup> See White, p. 36.

<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey S Proehl, 'The Images Before Us: Metaphors for the Role of the Dramaturg in American Theatre', in Jonas, Proehl and Lupu, pp. 132-3.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.sundance.org/about> (accessed 5 March 2011).

<sup>14</sup> email: 21 February 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Terry McCabe, *Mis-directing the Play* (Chicago: Ivan. R. Dee, 2001), p.70.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Ian Brown, 'The New Writing Policies of Clive Perry and Stephen MacDonald at the Royal Lyceum Theatre, 1966-79', *International Journal of Scottish Theatre* vol.2 no. 2 (2001), <http://journals.qmu.ac.uk/index.php/IJoST/article/view/84> (accessed 29 December 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Email: 25 October 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Email: 25 October 2009.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.playwrightsstudio.co.uk/Playwrightsnetworknorthwestplaywrights.htm> (accessed 5 March 2011).

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.scriptyorkshire.co.uk/aboutus2.htm> (accessed 5 March 2011).

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.playwrightsstudio.co.uk/playwrightsnetwork.htm> (accessed 5 March 2011)

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.tinderbox.org.uk/dramaturgy/> (accessed 5 March 2011)

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Nikki Axford, 19 October 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Email: Jaine Lumsden, Drama Officer, SAC, 19 October 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Playwrights' Studio, Scotland, *April 2004-March 2007 Review* (Glasgow: Playwrights' Studio, Scotland, 2007), p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Biographical information derived from [http://www.pallabs.org/about/who\\_pal\\_is/pal\\_team](http://www.pallabs.org/about/who_pal_is/pal_team) (accessed 23 December 2011).

<sup>27</sup> <http://ahds.ac.uk/creating/guides/new-media-tools/benn.htm>, see also <http://www.pallabs.org/> (both accessed 5 March 2011).

<sup>28</sup> Email: 25 October 2009.

<sup>29</sup> I am grateful to David Bradby, Steve Waters and Aoife Monks for their comments at different stages of the drafting of this article.