

**A Stage of One's Own:
The Artistic Devolution of Contemporary Scottish Theatre**

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Various recent studies on contemporary Scottish drama describe a certain shift or transition when they refer to a 'new generation' or a 'new wave', usually associated with the emergence of new names in the mid-1990s and the establishment of the devolved Scottish Parliament in 1999. However, this novelty observed in criticism is only partly due to personal and political changes, as it can be considered a conceptual shift that has affected and completely redefined such keywords of drama as space and theatre. Thus has developed a new meaning of freedom both in performance and playwriting practices. Therefore, instead of a turning point offered by political history (say, the 1979 referendum or 1999 opening of the Scottish Parliament), we can originate new Scottish drama from two events within theatrical history. One is the 1988 opening of the Tramway in Glasgow as a performance venue, and the other is the 1994 premi re of David Greig's *Europe*.

It seems to be almost universally observed by critics that somewhere around 1970 and then between the 1980s and 1990s, a radical change took place in Scottish playwriting, and that the later dividing line separates generations, themes and notions of Scottishness. Cairns Craig and Randall Stevenson, in the 'Introduction' to their 2001 anthology *Twentieth Century Scottish Drama*,¹ explain that in the 1970s 'theatre became a driving force for Scottish cultural change', staging working-class experience, Scottish historical themes and gender issues in a distinctively Scottish voice (xi). They identify Liz Lochhead's *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* as the end of this period, that is, 1987. For them, the new period has been marked by the creation of new performance venues, new writing workshops at the Traverse, European dimensions, the disappearance of the direct interrogation of Scottish history and identity, and the diversification of Scottish voices encountered until that point, not only through theatre but also through television, novels and films. They list Chris Hannan, David Greig, Rona Munro, Linda McLean and Anne Marie di Mambro as the major representatives of the emerging new generation (xii).

Writing ten years later, in his chapter 'History in Contemporary Scottish Theatre' in 2011 *Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Drama*,² David Archibald also emphasises that the plays of the 1990s reflect a decreasing interest in the past and history, are more concerned with the present, and are often located in atemporal, geographically unidentifiable spaces (90). As the cause of the decline of historicity,

he identifies the ideological impact of the demise of the Soviet system in Eastern Europe, which left no existing alternatives to capitalism (88). In the same volume, Steve Cramer's chapter on Traverse playwrights differentiates between the 1980s generation, characterised by financial crises and cuts, murmurs of decreasing quality, and the use of complex metaphors and the new 1990s generation, characterised by subjectivity, individualism, non-rootedness in affirming philosophies, logocentrism, alienation and dislocation (171). Generation One is linked to the names of Peter Arnott, Hannan, and Jo Clifford, and Generation Two to David Harrower, Greig and Stephen Greenhorn. According to Cramer, the two groups are bridged by their deep disregard of naturalism (176). Dan Rebellato, in his 'Introduction' to David Greig's *Plays: 1* (2002),³ interprets such a division in Scottish drama between the historical/political versus non-historical/ non-political as a shift from local to global, and globalised, themes, as a search for value beyond materialistic and economic value (xiii). Trish Reid, in her chapter, 'Post-Devolutionary Drama', again, in *The Edinburgh Companion*, credits the plays from the 1990s with reflecting a non-threatening, civic nationalism embracing Scotland's internal diversity and internationalist ambitions, appealing to audiences home and abroad (188). In saying this, she highlights Greig's *Europe* and Greenhorn's *Passing Places* from that decade (191).

Several other sources could be cited, but the point is surely clear. A major tendency of the transition observed by critics in these years is the decrease of the Scotland-set, often historical, pieces explicitly reflecting on Scottishness. These give way to more internationalist, general or atemporal themes and settings dealing with a wide range of issues like multiculturalism, globalisation, dislocation and alienation, from a characteristically Scottish perspective. In a global context, the emergence of new Scottish playwriting coincided with the mostly London-based theatre movement defined by Aleks Sierz as 'in-yer-face'.⁴ This was partly conceived as an explosion of energy, rage against Western society's indifference and insensibility in spite of, for example, the daily close-ups on television showing images of civil war and genocide in Yugoslavia. Scottish drama, however, as Cramer notes, remained less extravagant in imagery, with the exception of Anthony Neilson, at that time London-based, and who, with Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill, became a leading figure of the new in-yer-face movement (171).

Another global movement of the 1990s has influenced Scottish drama to a great extent, and that is site-specific theatre. As Fiona Wilkie explains,⁵ the term 'site-specific' filtered into theatre vocabulary from minimalist visual arts, in which works

were supposed to acquire meaning through the place they were exposed at, making the question 'where?' more important than 'what?' (90) Thus, the audience's relationship with space became central in aesthetic debate, examining the spatial dimensions of contemporary identities. The adaptation of the site-specific viewpoint to theatre has inevitably redefined some of its keywords, resulting in a conceptual shift that, as we will argue, can be considered both a source and a major characteristic of contemporary Scottish drama. To begin with, theatre, in most recently published dictionaries, is still first defined as a building and only then as an art form. A collective cultural knowledge of the urban building where the curtain rises every night to reveal a decorated stage with actors and actresses on it, rewarded with a warm applause, is so powerful that not even the last century's playwrights' and directors' rag could modify, at least as yet, the often-bourgeois label attached to theatre as entertainment. In site-specific theatre, however, performance never takes place in a theatre building, but at a non-theatre-venue, also called a 'found space', which can be any place with an audience. There, performance creates an alternative site; the particular location raises the question of what 'site' as a category can mean, and this leads us to the re-interpretation of 'space'. The *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* reflects the polysemy of the term as it defines the noun *space* as both 'a limited extent in one, two or three dimensions', and 'a boundless three-dimensional extent in which objects and events occur and have relative position and direction'.

Space, then, rather chimerically, can be limited or limitless. Limited spaces always have opposing corners, so concepts can be pushed towards the extremes to give way to binary oppositions, which traditional self-identification relies on: the pairs of male and female, white and black, right and wrong, self and the other only make sense in limited space. Limitless space, or absolute space, lacks borders and thus is inclusive. In terms of national identity, it corresponds to non-threatening, civic nationalism, but we can also link it to the utopia of globalisation, and in an even more abstract dimension, to freedom. Reid notes that '[q]uestions of inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and borders, whether real or imagined, have for a generation of playwrights working in a post-devolutionary context, affected their terms of engagement with issues of identity and difference' (188). Surveying David Greig's oeuvre, for example, we see that the tension between limited and limitless spaces is central and omnipresent. In *The Cosmonaut's Last Message to the Woman he once loved in the former Soviet Union*, the doomed Soviet cosmonauts fail to find the borders in outer space they need to maintain their identities, while the other

characters down here on Earth are alienated and unable to communicate as a result of the different borders between which they live.

After this brief preliminary discussion of how site-specific performances have reflected on and extended our notions of theatre and space, let us return to Craig and Stevenson's suggestion that Liz Lochhead's 1987 *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* marked the end, or rather the climax, of an era on the Scottish stage (xii). The play is certainly a milestone, with its iconoclastic uniting of music hall, circus, freak show, fairy tales, Gothic elements, re-imagined national history and contemporary politics, together with its linguistic brilliance and paralleling of gender and national identities. The years after that production, which witnessed the disappearance of major political figures symbolising the 1980s, like Reagan, Thatcher and, indeed, the Soviet Union, were fruitful for the Scottish arts scene, not least because they brought internationally significant site-specific performances to the country. Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*, a 1985 Western stage adaptation of the Sanskrit epic, had its only UK production in 1988 in Glasgow's former Museum of Transport, which subsequently became the Tramway, a contemporary visual and performance arts venue, which Brook famously described as '[a]n industrial cathedral that connects art with humanity...It's real, it speaks of the city's history, it speaks of Glasgow'.⁶ The redefinition of the Tramway as an arts temple, however, was not *Mahabharata*'s only achievement. On the one hand, it drew Western attention onto what many described as the Bible of Indian literature, staging it –in however, in Edward Said's terms, orientalisng a way – as a universal tale of nature, culture and humanity, thus creating an absolute space, inclusive and limitless, that was there before creation and will remain after the apocalypse. On the other hand, Brook's project proved to city councils that quality theatre could be a good investment and a good marketing strategy to promote a city's image. In both respects, it was partly responsible for the opening of new venues and the growing prestige of site-specific performances.

Two years later, for example, Bill Bryden's *The Ship* (1990), the Scottish epic staged in a former shipyard engine shed and concerning the building of the QE2, so that site and theme became inextricably intertwined, became the flagship production of Glasgow's European City of Culture programmes and the most expensive Scottish theatre production hitherto. This explored issues of craft, labour and social engagement in terms that made the building of 'The Ship' a metaphor for worldwide family and work tensions and aspirations. We see that, besides the places where they were premièred, their differing, but strong, international dimensions make

both *Mahabharata* and *The Ship* essentially different from the decade's earlier plays, marking a new space-opening tendency in form and content. It is also significant that sixteen years after the success of *The Ship*, on 25 February 2006, Scottish theatre chose site-specific drama again to immortalise one of the major moments in its history: the launching of the National Theatre of Scotland. The event consisted of a production, *Home*, simultaneously staged at ten different places, among them a disused glass factory, a shop, a ferry and a council housing block. It celebrated Scotland's diversity and creativity: a radically new concept of national theatre was born, one not building-based, but more like a label that can be attached to selected drama projects, connoting experiment and accessibility. The innovative concept of the NTS is related to civic nationalism and limitless space.

So far we have discussed the triangle of space, theatre and freedom in terms of form, as a question of where and how plays are staged, and how this complex decision can transform the meaning of a production. Now, we will explore how site-specific theatre's meditation on these spatial issues filtered into playwriting practice, offering, among others, new themes, conflicts, structural models and aesthetic solutions.

David Greig's first defining success, *Europe*, premiered at the Traverse Theatre on 21 October 1994. At first glance, little connection might be detected between the play and the issues discussed so far: it is non-naturalistic, yet rather conventional in terms of staging. Deeper insight, however, reveals that Greig's screaming express trains might actually leave from Glasgow's tramway. The play, together with its author, usually ranks very highly when contemporary Scottish theatre is evaluated, and it has been translated into many languages ranging from Swedish to Slovene, contributing to Scottish culture's global ambitions and achievement. This also implies that its rather bold enterprise – to stage a whole continent and the European Dream, a much less discussed concept than its American counterpart – appeals to many different audiences worldwide. Scores of reviews and academic analyses have dissected the play, usually setting out the view that the central element is Scotland, Europe, the nation or the body. Let us here, however, consider space as the protagonist. The characters' names Sava and Berlin denote two contradictory processes: Berlin, the reunified city, a spatial union, and Sava, a spatial disintegration. (The Sava used to be one of the longest European rivers flowing in a single country, ex-Yugoslavia, but now it crosses four national borders and is actually the border itself between Croatia and Bosnia.) In the play, it is Berlin who manages to get on the train and leave the village, not Sava: the European

express, therefore, carries the spatial union Berlin's name represents to its unknown destination, transcending borders.

Space, then, is movement in Greig's hands, it is not static or limited, and Morocco's famous toast, probably among the play's most-quoted utterances, reflects on this idea: 'nothing's more of a prison than a home. Nothing is a bigger threat to a man's liberty than three meals a day and familiar faces at the dinner table. To Freedom!' (71) '[H]ome' here is usually interpreted as a reference to a layer of one's national identity, be it Scotland, Europe or a smaller unit. I suggest, however, also considering it as a reference to theatre, comparing it to an idea expressed by Brook in *The Empty Space*:

A professional theatre assembles different people every night and speaks to them through the language of behaviour. A performance gets set and usually has to be repeated—and repeated as well and accurately as possible—but from the day it is set something invisible is beginning to die.(15)⁷

Here, Greig and Brook coincide when speaking against static places and routine, describing them as self-limiting and destructive. The alternative, open space, is penetrated at the end of *Europe*, on the express train that offers at least the appearance, however bound by railway lines, of free movement and an infinite number of possible decisions. We can see that, besides embodying the new Scottish playwriting described by scholars, Greig's work is also significant because of its structure that explores and contrasts different notions of space.

As a conclusion, we can say that one of the major novelties of contemporary Scottish theatre is opening space: new spaces for performance, a space on stage for Scotland's diversity, for Europe and the world, where borders should not separate and segregate but have to be crossed in order to experiment and find new meaning. A very recent, 2011 production of *Europe* by the Hungarian theatre group Sziliget of Oradea, Romania, can be seen as a symbiosis of the issues discussed in this paper. There, Greig's work was staged as a site-specific performance in a railway station and in the last act, on a real train taking audiences to the country's borders, which are still a conflictual issue in Hungarian and Romanian national identities, and have not been eliminated yet by the Schengen Agreement.

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