

Telling Stories: Fifty Years of New Playwriting in Scotland

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Guest Editor

‘Now, has anyone else got a good story?’ This was the provocation with which David Greig concluded his keynote at the ‘Haggis Hunting’ conference held in April 2013, at which the ideas in the articles in this and the next issue of *The International Journal of Scottish Theatre and Screen* were first presented. The title of the conference was taken from Jan McDonald’s 1984 essay ‘What is a citizens’ theatre?’ in which she describes ‘the haggis hunt for the great new Scottish play’ as ‘the bugbear of development of the theatre in Scotland’ (p. 2). Contributors to the conference were invited to think about what constitutes a ‘Scottish’ play. What is apparent in the articles that appear in these issues of the journal, and in the keynote speeches and panel discussions that took place at both the *Haggis Hunting* conference, and the *Four Decades* events hosted by the Scottish Society of Playwrights held in the following week, was that the question and the definition has moved on in a way that McDonald anticipates in her essay.

Writing in response to criticism of the programming decisions made by Giles Havergal and his designer Philip Prowse at Glasgow’s Citizens’ Theatre, McDonald argues ‘[a]ll the plays are *about* Scottish life because they are *about* some aspect of our existence’ (1984, p.15). In *Theatre and Scotland*, Trish Reid similarly argues that this ‘theatre of high esoteric camp’ (one of many descriptions McDonald lists [p. 11]) had more in common with alternative versions of Glaswegian masculinity found in the contemporaneous music scene, and sees the legacy in the ‘high-camp’ of David

Greig's adaptation of *The Bacchae* (2007) for the National Theatre of Scotland (2013b, pp. 55-6). The national theatre question is also one that McDonald touches on in her essay. As an undergraduate, I remember McDonald's response to the debate was a desire to put a plaque on the wall of every theatre in the country which read '*this is the national theatre of Scotland*'. Her egalitarian vision anticipated the 'theatre without walls' project that emerged, and the international work she celebrates in the essay again anticipates the perspective of many of the playwrights discussed in this issue: 'In seeking a national theatre, perhaps Scotland has succeeded in fostering an international theatre, a 'citizens' theatre in the fullest sense of the term' (1984, p. 16).

The conference from which these articles have evolved marked the twin anniversaries of two key new writing organisations in Scotland: the fortieth anniversary of the Scottish Society of Playwrights and the fiftieth anniversary of the Traverse Theatre. The conference was conceived of, with my co-organiser, Nicola McCartney, through our shared desire to celebrate the wealth of material that has emerged in the last five decades, much of which remains unpublished. Ian Brown's phrase – 'creative amnesia' – which he uses in the body and title of his introduction to *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Drama* to refer to the neglect and ignorance of Scottish theatre history, has become a useful aphorism for scholars themselves adding to the 'cure' (2011, p. 5). Trish Reid quotes the phrase in *Theatre and Scotland* – and indeed the inclusion of this volume in a series of books on theatre is itself an indication of an increasing recognition of Scottish theatre – and Tom Maguire uses the documentary tradition as an example in his article. Brown ascribes the misunderstanding of the Scottish theatre tradition in part to an 'emphasis on performance rather than text' (p. 4) and it is apparent from the articles in this issue

that many of the texts follow a collective creative process that Reid finds to be one feature of Scottish theatre. Celebrating the achievements of the Traverse and the Scottish Society of Playwrights, however, the emphasis of the conference was on the work of individual writers, and included in this issue are articles on David Greig, Zinnie Harris and Anthony Neilson.

Considering 'creative amnesia' in relation to the achievements of individual writers during this period is not straightforward. The SSP's *Four Decades* devoted a day to each decade of playwriting, featuring panel discussions and readings. It was apparent on the first day that many of the writers from the 1970s, for example Hector MacMillan and Donald Campbell, felt disillusioned by the neglect of their work and of themselves as playwrights. Each decade brings a new raft of playwrights who are willing to credit those who have come before – Jo Clifford famously stood up at a previous celebration and credited these same playwrights as the inspiration for her career, and David Greig has described how the ground established by 1980s playwrights enabled new innovations in his work (2011, p. 18). Events like these and publications like this are important in ensuring that (in relative terms) our short-term memories are subject to the same scrutiny as our long-term memories regarding the history of the Scottish play; encompassing in 2013 new productions of Hector MacMillan's *The Sash* (1973) as well as Sir David Lyndsay's *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis* (1554).

To conclude the final day of *Four Decades*, David Edgar was invited to observe and reflect on the discussions around 'The Future of Scottish Playwriting'. One word he noted as absent from the discussion that is relevant to the articles published here

was ‘canon’. Perhaps in the same way as the National Theatre of Scotland had ‘a lucky escape’ (David Greig, 2013a) by avoiding the restrictions of a building, Scottish playwriting is freed by a lack of established ‘canon’, though it is important that this should be a liberating rather than limiting scenario, in the sense that a range of texts may be restaged and reinvigorated within the contemporary moment. The potential for this has been explored not only by ‘The Visitors’ readings (a series founded by Nicola McCartney in Glasgow in 2010 in which a practitioner chooses a play to direct as a rehearsed reading)¹ and the NTS’s *Staging the Nation* project but also in the readings that accompanied both *Haggis Hunting* and *Four Decades*, the latter in particular making apparent the prescience of the work in relation to the current political situation.²

The Traverse are currently marketing their fiftieth year with the tagline ‘Fifty years of new’, accentuating their identity as Scotland’s new writing venue (in their 2013 Spring brochure, using images from *Slab Boys* [1978], *White Rose* [1985], *Midsummer [A Play with Songs]* [2008] and *The Arthur Conan Doyle Appreciation Society* [2012]). The slogan stresses the idea of innovation but also reveals the history of innovation in new Scottish writing: a past informing present ideas of experimentation. The legacy of the ‘new’ in relation to the stories made and staged in Scotland is present throughout the articles in this issue, and formed part of the arguments made by each of the keynote speakers. In the first keynote, “‘Braid, barley-bree an paintit room’: The Scottish Play Today’, Trish Reid characterised the telling of stories in Scotland in two ways:

First, that Scottish theatre is understood as having a role in the present, an oppositional and often subversive quality that has enabled artists to articulate Scotland's grievances, not so that Scottish audiences might become immune to them, but so that they might find the energy to resist. Second, participation in the joyful is in part the means by which we conjure our vision of a better future. (2013b).

Reid accentuated the importance of the Traverse – apparent in the fact that seven of the twelve plays featured on the National Library of Scotland's Key Plays 1970-2010 list premiered there – and of its 1985 season. Pointing out that nine of the plays on the list are history plays, Reid remarked on the role of new writing in using the past to understand the present, quoting Ian Brown's analysis that one of 'the great achievements of the Scottish stage has been the variety and complexity of the ways in which it has dealt with history and the particular significance of this use of the past for the present stage of Scottish culture and history' (1996, p. 85). The only twenty-first century play on the list, which Reid identified as synonymous with the success of the National Theatre of Scotland, is *Black Watch* (2006); a play which is the subject of both Tom Maguire's article and Sarah Beck's forum piece in this issue. Reid concluded that, in relation to Scottish theatre 'we can look back with some satisfaction, certainly, and forward with no little confidence'. In terms of looking forward, she returned again to the idea of joy in relation to Cora Bissett and David Greig's *Glasgow Girls* (2012), which she described as placing 'an unfashionable emphasis on optimism, sincerity and affirmation'. Present in this piece is the idea of the power of inter-generational relationships, literalising a theme that recurs in the articles in connection with 'old' new and 'new' new work. In the first article, for

example, Tom Maguire considers the relationship between *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1973) and recent documentary work.

Maguire provides the title of this issue in his interrogation of ideas of truth and reality explored through the stories told in documentary performances including *Cheviot, Black Watch* and *Enquirer* (2012). He references a wide range of documentary work produced in Scotland in the last decade, making links between recent work and a Scottish tradition underexplored critically. He relates this neglect not only to ‘creative amnesia’ but to a general suspicion about documentary theatre, associated with the ‘haggis hunt’ for the single-authored play. Maguire makes links between documentary theatre and popular performance as part of a Scottish tradition apparent in *Ane Satyre*. He describes the performer as a distinguishing feature of Scottish theatre, tracing the tradition from *The Great Northern Welly Boot Show* to *Glasgow Girls* (2012); a point illustrated by the inclusion in the Traverse’s celebratory brochure images, alongside stills from the plays I list above, of one simply titled ‘Gregor Fisher’ (2013). Maguire considers the role of documentary theatre to pose and explore questions of what kind of society does and should exist in Scotland. He describes the research methodologies informing *Cheviot, Black Watch* and *Enquirer*, including John Tiffany’s concern in the latter to tell real stories in real words. Maguire links the ways these shows were made to an emphasis in Scottish theatre on collaboration, apparent in the working methods of companies such as 7:84 (Scotland) and the National Theatre of Scotland. He looks at sites of performance and how performers in *Cheviot* adapted content to relate to specific touring venues, considering the differences between this approach and methods used in *Black Watch*

and *Enquirer* to analyse the ways in which these productions are indebted to and advance the documentary form in a Scottish context.

Maguire critiques the anxiety expressed from Plato to Hare about the inadequacy of fiction to explore the challenges facing society, and another repost to this may be found in Julia Boll's article in which she analyses the conflicts depicted in Zinnie Harris's war plays. Again there is present a theme of repetition – both in the recurring image of the wheel in war plays and in Harris's exploration of war as cyclical. Boll considers how Harris's war trilogy – *Midwinter* (2004), *Solstice* (2005) and *Fall* (2008) – and *The Wheel* (2011) engage with ideas of contemporary warfare and war theory in which war is a perpetual rather than exceptional state for society. In the article, she draws parallels between the worlds Harris depicts and the characteristics of New War as critiqued by political scientist Mary Kaldor, including the role of identity politics in organised violence. Boll links the plays to the image of the Final Girl in Slasher movies – alive at the end and thus changing role from victim to survivor – noting also the increasing androgyny of this character's depiction as the films' narratives progress. She identifies this figure in other war plays by female writers and considers how the Final Girl is tainted by the horror she overcomes. Boll explores how Harris's characters engage with and disengage from the state of perpetual war. Boll advances explorations of the Final Girl of the screen to consider how her presence on stage shifts the gaze from objectified figure to challenger. The Final Girl moves within Boll's article from the isolated survivor figure of film to a guide through conflict. The article concludes with an analysis of the end of *The Wheel*, which finishes where it begins: history literally repeating within the present.

The idea of different temporalities providing potential trap or escape is also present in Anthony Neilson's *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* (2004), which is the focus of Gary Cassidy's article relating the play to concepts of liminality. Cassidy has written the article in part in response to the lack of academic criticism of Neilson's work, particularly in terms of textual and thematic analysis. His article is new in this sense, and also in terms of the material it includes, notably drawing on a recent interview with Neilson. Following Trish Reid's positioning of Neilson as a Scottish writer drawing on music hall traditions, Cassidy considers how the idea of liminality relates to boundaries and thresholds in the context of Neilson's idea that we live in between the internal and the external. Cassidy pursues the idea of liminal landscape into allusions to existing fantasy realms and the relationship between the fantastical and the material world of *Dissocia*, the interaction between mindscape and dreams, and the importance of sound and song in the piece. He considers the links between reality and *Dissocia*'s liminality: the soundscape signalling both psychotic breaks in reality and signifying 'real world' events. Cassidy highlights the ways in which the liminality of the play accentuates the liminality of the theatrical form; the theatricality of dreams and the dreamlike quality of theatre.

Boundaries and thresholds are differently explored in Pamela McQueen's article on David Greig's *The Speculator* (1999). McQueen builds on existing discussion of Greig's transnational characterisation, accentuating the sense of fluidity and flexibility the play depicts in relation to identity. The historical characters staged by Greig appear to provide an internationalist model for a devolved Scotland. McQueen explores how the performance context for the play's premieres relate to the play's themes: first staged in the same year as the Scottish Parliament opened, but first

performed in the Catalan language in Barcelona, the play itself an act of ‘intercultural communication’ examining questions of and possibilities for national identity. McQueen analyses *The Speculator* in the context of Habermas’s notion of discursive citizenship and Bakhtin’s two forms of discourse. She considers the language of storytelling Greig employs, focusing on John Law, Lord Islay and the Beggars’ Chorus; Greig using existing stories to tell a story about a new Scotland. McQueen describes the simultaneously historicised and globalised world of *The Speculator*, characterising Law as ‘global elite’, Islay as ‘cosmopolitan’ and accentuating the connections with the staging of Scottish history in *Cheviot* and Liz Lochhead’s *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* (1987). What McQueen finds in *The Speculator* is the articulation of a global, European and international identity as a Scottish tradition. Greig’s play is interesting for the anachronisms with which he engages: positioning his characters, as McQueen suggests, ‘between worlds’, he opens up new possibilities for the nation he stages. Through these stories he reminds us of the stories not yet lived, not yet told, again inviting something *new*.

The stories told of the Australia Steve Cramer describes in his article are made from source material he found replicated in Scotland: drawing on music hall traditions to stage tales of an urban working class embedded in violence, sectarianism and oppressive masculinity. Cramer positions these similarities in relation to ideas of colonialism and nationalism in the context of empire and industry. He identifies key political moments in each nation’s framing of a sense of self, including steps on the road to devolution. He characterises the repeated subject matter of both the Scottish drama of the 1970s and the Australian New Wave as ‘an image of masculinity troublingly dogged by emotional inarticulateness, sectarian bigotry and violence’. The

article provides an interesting reflection not only on the plays considered, but also in relation to those critiqued in the articles that precede it: which motifs continue to haunt the theatrical landscape and which have evolved. The forms of music hall and popular theatre are present in different ways in the plays, for example, but gender is imagined differently. In *Dissocia* (and in *The Events* by David Greig and *Ciara* by David Harrower presented at 2013's Edinburgh festival), a male playwright writes a female protagonist. Speaking on a panel of female dramatists at the *Haggis Hunting* conference, Claire Duffy voiced her frustration at the fact that 'if you put a man on stage, he speaks and stands for everyone; if you put a woman on stage, she speaks only for herself'. The idea that Scotland's leading male playwrights may more easily bypass this gender divide than female writers is a complex and potentially similarly frustrating one, but is notable here for the different representation on the contemporary Scottish stage than the one Cramer describes, crippled by images of reductive masculinity.

Cramer's article provides an analysis of the work of Scottish and Australian dramatists in the context of political and cultural events, identifying representative playwrights from each 'movement' including Ian Brown, Bill Bryden, John Byrne, Stewart Conn, John McGrath, Tom McGrath, Hector MacMillan and Roddy MacMillan; and Alexander Buzo, Dorothy Hewett, Jack Hibbard, Barry Oakley, John Romeril and David Williamson. Cramer explores the significance of popular entertainment forms within small nation drama as a means of expressing distance as well as dissonance, analysing Barry Oakley's *The Feet of Daniel Mannix* (1971) in the context of its relationship to contemporaneous Australian and current Scottish politics. He also examines the nationalism in Hewett's *The Chapel Perilous* (1971) in

relation to the two nations' rejection of the sentimentalisation of rural life within drama. Cramer analyses Conn's *The Burning* (1971) for language and stagecraft as modes of political resistance. Cramer identifies the 1970s as periods of increased confidence – more proactive in terms of speaking in dialect and thus creating a theatrical language and mode, comparing the provocations in *The Bevellers* and *Norm and Ahmed* that suggest that, both in terms of industry and history, existing tropes are no longer available and so a new identity must emerge. In his conclusion, Cramer looks forward to the 1980s and the marginalised and silenced voices now heard; the new stories emerging and redefining if not identity itself, then the understanding and articulation of identity in Scotland and Australia.

Implicit within the idea of telling stories is the notion of the cyclical nature of plays and themes and in her forum piece, Sarah Beck returns to *Black Watch* but also again to the new. Beck explores forms of telling stories incorporating the themes dominating previous decades – of masculinity, violence and national identity – told in new ways using Scottish traditional forms. Beck provides a further, valuable layer of documentation by drawing on new interview materials to describe the creative process behind *Black Watch*. The collaborative nature of the process Beck describes links again to traditions apparent in *Cheviot*, a play which influenced Tiffany and an example of the ways in which Scottish theatre draws on itself for inspiration. One of the points Beck raises is the lack of recognition the soldiers felt on their homecoming. *Black Watch* provides that recognition in terms of staging sacrifice but does not make their deeds heroic. Rather, in the continuous touring, it makes the tale epic in terms of its staging and also through the constant retelling: the story of the Scottish soldier told and retold around the world. Beck adopts composer Davey Anderson's

characterisation of *Black Watch* as ‘post-verbatim’, incorporating Gregory Burke’s memory of the soldiers’ words and his re-imagining of their stories in fictionalised scenes. Beck draws on interviews with Davey Anderson, Ross Anderson, Gregory Burke, Brian Ferguson and John Tiffany to critique the ethics of the interaction between the creative team and those with first hand experience of the war, drawing on the theories of Butler and Levinas to critique the responsibilities inherent in the creation and performance of theatre of this nature.

In both *Glasgow Girls* (2012) and *The Events* (2013b), David Greig was responding to recent news events and developing aspects of the documentary/post-verbatim form that has been a feature of the last fifty years of new playwriting in Scotland. It is interesting to consider Greig’s keynote at *Haggis Hunting* (2013a) in relation to *The Events*. The play was, in part, inspired by and researched following the shootings in Norway by Anders Breivik, but is performed by a Scottish and an English actor, using Scottish place references, touring to venues in Scotland, England and Ireland. The piece will be performed in Norway and Austria with different performers, presumably referencing different locales. In both the play and his keynote, Greig considers the notion of humanity as tribe – in the play in its positive and negative associations, in the keynote to consider our impulse to tell stories and to grapple with the ‘language question’. For Greig, the language question is connected to the idea of home – a notion that is problematic for him since he has a sense of places that he is ‘not quite from’. In his keynote, he made the connection between the heightened language of theatre and the theatrical nature of Scots language on stage – citing John Byrne’s *Slab Boys* (1978) as emblematic of this – complicating the notion of being ‘from’ somewhere whilst emphasising its importance. Reid engaged with the

endless problematizing of this question in her keynote, describing her experience of growing up in the East End of Glasgow surrounded by people who considered themselves Irish and thus othered by notions of Scottishness. As a young theatregoer at the Citizens' she did not question whether the European repertoire was or was not Scottish: it was the theatre of Scotland. Greig considered different attempts to invent or invest in language as it relates to identity, including Ewan MacColl and the folk revival and Hugh MacDiarmid's *Lallans*. Greig - whose play *Europe* (1994) features on the National Library of Scotland's key plays list - in 1990 asked himself the question, 'Could I write a Scottish play?' Looking to the work of Byrne and others Greig decided that he could:

It turned out that Scottish theatre wasn't Scottish because it accurately represented the language of Scotland. It was Scottish because it PRODUCED the language of Scotland, remade it, re-imagined it anew.

Greig decided 'I must fashion and find for it my own idiolect' – speaking with the optimism and forward-looking approach Reid identified in *Glasgow Girls*. There was optimism also in Greig's assessment of the advantages of writing from within a nation – and thus a position – that may be seen as peripheral. Able to make links with international theatres in places that also regard themselves as peripheral, the peripheral becomes mainstream. Greig also identified the advantages of a national theatre without walls and work produced without the restrictions of solid ideas of what theatre is and indeed what national identity is: 'a means by which us theatre makers can reflect back to the people of Scotland an image of themselves unlimited by form, language or, indeed, heritage'. He concluded with the idea that 'it is in our

DNA to feel at home when we are surrounded by different languages'³ – again an idea of Scottish theatre without walls and an image visually realised in the closing sequence of *Glasgow Girls* when the characters dance to the music of the different cultures represented within the play. This dancing represents a visual realisation also of another idea of possibilities he articulated in his keynote, that 'in the imaginative world, we encounter versions of ourselves - we are given a jolt of pure energy and possibilities open up'. In this and the next issue of the journal the articles consider the energy and possibilities in the stories told in the last fifty years of new writing staged in Scotland: what they tell us about the past, and as ever, what this past tells us about the possibilities for our present.

Notes

¹ Readings from this series include *The Cut* by Mike Cullen (1994) and *Shimmer* by Linda McLean (2004).

² Readings at the *Four Decades* event were from *The Dead of Night* by Stanley Eveling (1975), *Losing Venice* by Jo Clifford (1985), *Passing Places* by Stephen Greenhorn (1997) and *Further Than the Furthest Thing* by Zinnie Harris (2000).

³ Greig here makes a creative point that is reflected in a lot of contemporary academic literature that regards Scottish writing as multilingual. *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature* (2007) series, for example, emphasises the importance of Scots, Gaelic and Latin writing.

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