

**Between the Local and the International: Fifty Years of New Playwriting in  
Scotland**

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**Guest Editor**

‘In seeking a national theatre, perhaps Scotland has succeeded in fostering an international theatre’ wrote Jan McDonald in her defence of programming at the Citizens’ Theatre three decades ago (1984, p. 16). In my introduction to the first special issue celebrating fifty years of the Traverse and forty years of the Scottish Society of Playwrights, I considered the resonance of McDonald’s definition and defence of a broader understanding of what ‘Scottish’ theatre might mean in the context of the ambitions and work of current theatre practitioners. Many of the articles in this issue continue this debate to consider the ways in which Scottish theatre of the past and present engages with local and international performance traditions.

The title of this issue is taken from Olga Taxidou’s article about the theoretical and theatrical work of John McGrath and the ways in which he was in dialogue with the international, a theme that recurs in many of the articles published in this issue; potentially acquiring a different dimension in the current political moment. The concluding debate of the *Haggis Hunting* conference was a panel discussion on the 1979 and 2014 Referendums, and the final day of the SSP celebration was devoted to ‘The Future of Scottish Playwriting’ – each of these events considering the position of Scotland in the context of international and local politics and international and local theatre. What the articles published in this issue demonstrate is the ways in which the local and the international have always been present on the Scottish stage.

In her article In ‘The Theatre of John McGrath: between Theatre and Theory, between the Local and the International’, Taxidou argues for the significance of McGrath’s output as a ‘specifically British attempt to appropriate, re-write and adjust’ the philosophical debates of Benjamin, Lukacs, Brecht and Adorno around ideas of the relationship between art and politics. Drawing on an interview with Jean-Pierre Simard, Taxidou notes the significance of McGrath’s reference to Adorno and use of his terms to align his own work with Marxist criticism, emphasising the importance of acknowledging his project as theatre maker and theatre theorist. Taxidou explains McGrath’s evocation of both Adorno and Gramsci in interview as a way of understanding his interventions into both modernist debates and popular traditions. She makes a fascinating link between a description of a 1928 Moscow performance of the *Blue Blouse* and the influence acknowledged by McGrath in the use of popular performing traditions in *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*. The influence of this production on current Scottish theatre works including *Black Watch* was explored in articles in the first of these special issues and Taxidou here reminds us of the international inherent in the local.

Taxidou proposes that McGrath’s writings be read within the concept of the manifesto – again reinforcing the links between his theoretical and theatrical output: ‘This fusion of aesthetics and politics that the manifesto enacts always contains within it the seeds of an often unrealisable and utopian future’. This description captures Trish Reid’s analysis of the final scene of *Glasgow Girls* in her *Haggis Hunting* conference keynote, a scene – within which characters from different nations and generations danced to music reflecting the cultural diversity of their backgrounds – that provides an image of the local and the international on stage. Taxidou identifies the ways in which McGrath’s writings ‘bring together an analysis of the present and

always gesture towards a utopian future'. She identifies the importance of McGrath's understanding of the stage as a space of Badiou's 'intermediate future'. Taxidou accentuates McGrath's attempts to revise the Royal Court 'creation myth' of contemporary British Theatre by again focussing on the relationship between the international and the local and thus on an alternative history of political theatre. She traces the interweaving strands of influence between popular forms of theatre and the political in the work of those whose writings informed McGrath, as well as his own theatrical and theoretical creations.

In 'Something In It for the Underdog: The Playwriting of Joan Ure', Victoria Price seeks to counter the 'Creative Amnesia' (Brown, 2011, p. 1) in relation to Scottish female playwrights by focussing on the frequently forgotten plays of Joan Ure. Price provides a history of Ure's work for the stage, much of it never produced, reflecting one of Ure's concerns about the limitations facing female dramatists in Scottish theatre. Price explores the ways in which these issues are expressed in the play *Take Your Old Rib Back, Then* (1974) and a short monologue performed at the SSP conference in 1977, *Make a Space for Me*. Price considers the obstacles Ure faced and the ways in which she addressed these both practically and thematically. In her outspoken criticism of the position of women in theatre, Price characterises Ure as distinct from her contemporaries, and different also in her experimentations with form and theatricality. Price considers the tensions between poetry and theatre that exist in Ure's use of language and space, and her repositioning of female characters – removing them from the margins and the domestic sphere. Price argues that in *Something in It for Cordelia* and *Something in It for Ophelia* (1971), Ure's feminist re-workings resist and challenge the canon. Price explores the ways Ure examines contemporary gender roles through her re-imagining of Cordelia as protagonist and

critiques the limitations of audience identification with the male protagonist in *Something in It for Ophelia*. Through these plays Price discusses Ure's problematising of gender conventions in Scotland and on the Scottish stage. She concludes by considering the interest in Ure's work outside Scotland – in Italy in particular – in contrast with the neglect of her work in Scotland, arguing for the playwright's innovation in the ways in which she explored and challenged gender and social politics on the Scottish stage.

There is an irony in the title of Deana Nichols's article – “‘Only of Scottish Interest’: 7:84's Devolution Trilogy’ – before she begins her interrogation of the quotation: her own position as an international scholar provides an intriguing challenge to the dismissal (by David Greig's publishers) of any interest in the trilogy beyond the local. Nichols examines the significance of the three plays – Greig's *Caledonia Dreaming* (1997), Stephen Greenhorn's *Dissent* (1998) and Peter Arnott's *A Little Rain* (2000) – as explorations of Scotland in ‘the early devolution years’ and as reference points for political theatre responding to the forthcoming Referendum. Nichols emphasises interconnectedness rather than Scottishness as the site of commonality in Greig's ‘some kind of Edinburgh’-set play, which she describes as ‘reflecting the country's focus on civic rather than ethnic citizenship’ – again an instance of the utopian vision found in Greig's work and the glimpse Taxidou describes as part of the manifesto. Nichols describes the necessity of imagination advocated within the play for the realisation of the characters' utopian vision, particularly juxtaposed as their ‘Dreaming’ is with a city shown also as elitist and racist, a place where individual dreams can denigrate others.

Nichols contrasts the work of 7:84's founders with Greig's refusal of polemical politics and considers the range of critical responses to the subtleties of his

approach. She considers the exploration of individual and political compromise and betrayal in *Dissent*, charting the protagonist's progress to the Scottish Parliament and examining the tensions between Old and New Labour. She charts the decline in optimism apparent in the trilogy, concluding with *A Little Rain*, Arnott's apocalyptic reflection on devolved Scotland, characterising the reflections as dominated by 'meaninglessness and apathy'. However, Nichols links *A Little Rain* with *Caledonia Dreaming* in terms of ideas of interconnection, though in the later play these are directly linked to Arnott's assessment of Scotland in the anticlimax of devolution: 'intimately connected with the characters' practice of self-identifying in reference to each other is the practice of self-identifying as a nation in terms of the Other that is England'. Nichols explores Arnott's dramatic exploration of a possible 'new Scotland. With new dreams.' She links up again with *Caledonia Dreaming*'s optimism – but also the darker side Greig explores – as Arnott summarises the bigotry inherent in some debates: 'We are ourselves again. And this is who we are. Cunts.' Nichols concludes by addressing the quotation from her title to consider the international reach of political theatre and argues for the importance of the trilogy to the imaginative representation of a nation facing the Referendum.

In "“Who does the talking that matters”: Language, Politics, Identity in Scottish Vernacular Theatre 1970-2000' Colette Osgun argues that the adoption of Scots for political discourse was informed by a resurgence of the language on stage. In her article she looks at the ways playwrights have used Scots to voice and create conflict with which to challenge complacency within and towards working class cultures. Osgun links the interest in the past with the necessity of writing in Scots as attempts to explore and voice untold stories away from accepted narratives, addressing absence in terms of class and gender. In her article she views the

'linguistic, cultural and social claims' of the language of Scottish drama as reflections of and challenges to systems of 'nation-building'. Osgun analyses the use of English and Scots in Donald Campbell's *The Jesuit* (1976) to demonstrate how the play's central themes and conflicts are present in the language. She draws parallels between the debates of the play and the political debates of the 1970s and looks at McGrath's exploration of working class activism, apathy and (in)articulation in *Out of Our Heads* (1976) and the way in which social hierarchies are established linguistically. She links McGrath's language choice with his desire to engage and provoke working class audiences into action, exploring the ways in which McGrath and Bill Bryden in *Willie Rough* (1973) 'are in dialogue with one another' through their dramatisation and legitimisation of working class experience.

Osgun characterises a shift in the use of Scots in 1980s drama, with plays such as *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* employing a playfulness and more of a sense of the international in the multiplicities staged. She explores the Corbie as a produce of theatre's success 'in working to popularise dramatic and political engagement' and Lochhead's use of language in this and *Tartuffe* as connecting to both local and international theatre traditions. Her discussion moves to include the international in twentieth-century Scots work – including translations from and into a wide variety of languages, focussing on Findlay and Bowman's translation of Michel Tremblay's *Joual* plays as illustrative of this consciousness. Osgun considers how Scots in *The Guid Sisters* (1991) works, as in Lochhead, 'as social barometer'. Osgun sees an increased confidence in Scots emerging in post-devolution and with it an 'openness to internationalism'. She examines Edwin Morgan's *Phaedra* (2000) as blurring political and dramatic Scottish and European traditions. It is this engagement with the global that Osgun ultimately finds present in the use of Scots –

one with which political rhetoric is playing ‘catch-up’. As Scotland – through theatre and beyond – contemplates its position on the international stage, it is interesting to consider the ways in which the works explored here provide an insight into different reflections on and of current political debates and the different (utopian) futures imagined and imaginable.

In his forum piece, ‘Scottish Theatre Archives at Edinburgh University Library’, Paul Barnaby provides a valuable and intriguing insight into the materials available, including works by Hugh MacDiarmid, Norman MacCaig and Fred Urquhart. The most significant resources are the papers of George Mackay Brown and Sydney Goodsir Smith, which are also the focus of Barnaby’s article. Barnaby attributes the lack of attention given to Brown’s plays to a critical tendency to view them only in relation to his novels, but wonders at the neglect of his ‘self-standing’ plays, ten of which were produced in the 1980s which critics refer to as a ‘fallow period’ for Brown. The archive contains plays by Sydney Goodsir Smith, including an actor’s prompt copy of *The Wallace* (1960), as well as Smith’s sketches for costumes and set designs.

Barnaby highlights the wealth of material in Smith’s exchanges with Hugh MacDiarmid, whose wider correspondence is held by the archive. This collection includes letters from James Bridie detailing his defence against ‘MacDiarmid’s charges that he excludes plays written in Scots, scorns the theatre of ideas, [and] employs only London-trained actors’ – charges resonating with McDonald’s defence of the Citizens and Douglas Maxwell’s reference during the ‘Since 2001’ day he chaired at the SSP celebration to more recent debates which, in respect of the local and the international, have not always been characterised by the optimism dominating these special issues and the anniversary events from which they evolved.

Barnaby includes an overview of MacDiarmid's correspondence with another company engaged with the international and the local – Theatre Workshop – and argues that previous histories of the company 'have greatly underestimated the extent of MacDiarmid's collaboration' revealed in these letters. The letters document MacDiarmid's translation of *The Threepenny Opera*, revealing his preference to translate the work into Scots, believing the language to be better suited than English to Brecht's text. As in the earlier articles Barnaby's forum piece reminds us of the manifold ways in which Scottish theatre over the last fifty years has explored and inter-related the local and the national.

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