

Editorial: On the study and promotion of drama in Scottish Gaelic

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Guest-Editors

We are very grateful to the editors of the *International Journal of Scottish Theatre and Screen* for allowing us the opportunity to guest-edit a special volume about Gaelic drama. The invitation came after we had organised two panels on Gaelic drama at the biennial Gaelic studies conference, *Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig*, at the University Edinburgh 2014. We asked the contributors to those two panels to consider developing their papers and submit them to peer review for this special edition: each paper was read by both a Gaelic scholar and a theatre scholar and we are grateful to them for their insight and contributions. Together the six scholarly essays and one forum interview in this issue are the single biggest published work on Gaelic drama to date and go some way to highlighting the importance of this genre within Gaelic society.

In 2007 Michelle Macleod and Moray Watson noted that 'few studies of modern Gaelic drama' (Macleod and Watson 2007: 280) exist (prior to that its sum total was an unpublished MSc dissertation by Antoinette Butler in 1994 and occasional reviews): Macleod continued to make the case in her axiomatically entitled work 'Gaelic Drama: The Forgotten Genre in Gaelic Literary Studies'. (Dymock and McLeod 2011) More recently scholarship on Gaelic drama has begun to emerge and show, despite the fact that it had hitherto been largely neglected in academic criticism, that there is much to be gained from in-depth study of the genre. Significantly, a special edition of *Scottish Language – 'Scottish Languages on Stage'* – was published in 2014. That earlier special edition contains two articles by the guest-editors of this journal on Gaelic drama (on the issue of language manipulation and translation), and one other article by Emma Dymock which considers Gaelic code-switching in a nominally English play.

In spite of the apparent absence of Gaelic drama in academic discourse until recently, this is in no way a reflection of the elevated position it has held in the Gaelic community. Although, as discussed by Ian Brown here, we think that the first use of Gaelic in theatre was in the plays of Archibald McLaren around 1788-90, these instances, it seems, were exceptional. Michael Newton (2011) and Antoinette Butler have written about various theatrical or dramatic components of other Gaelic cultural practices, but it is not really until the beginning of the twentieth century that drama truly emerges as a distinct genre. At that

point, drama was encouraged as a stimulus for cultural and linguistic motivation and maintenance by the likes of Ruairidh Erskine of Marr, the Scottish nationalist, publisher and fervent Gaelic-language campaigner. Marr published a number of plays within his periodicals and wrote about the value of supporting drama: (*Guth na Bliadhna* 1913: 1914) one writer whom Erskine supported was Dòmhnall Mac na Ceàrdaich/Donald Sinclair whose dramatic writing is discussed here. Although drama at the start of the twentieth century appears to have been artificially or deliberately encouraged by Marr and An Comunn Gàidhealach, who sponsored drama-writing competitions, certainly as early as 1921, (Macleod 2011) it seems to have been well received as a genre: appealing both to the Gaels living in the Scottish cities and also those in the rural heartland communities. Macleod (2011) has written about various infrastructures which supported the development of theatre as a genre which appealed greatly to Gaels: a group of people who, because of the omnipresence of song, verse and story, were used to group cultural practices and embraced theatre wholeheartedly.

The Gael's affinity for drama was nurtured particularly in amateur drama festival competitions: those organised by both An Comunn Gàidhealach and by the Scottish Community Drama Association (SCDA) which allowed Gaelic-language plays to compete alongside English- and Scots-language plays from as early as 1935. Indeed, the majority of plays written between then and the current day have been created to be performed in this format: half-hour one-act performances. Other common genres of Gaelic drama include the radio plays produced by the BBC: the first of these broadcast as early as 1933. Over the years the BBC have both commissioned original works (Fionnlagh MacLeòid/Finlay MacLeod, whose work is under discussion by Michelle Macleod here, was a regular contributor to the BBC in the 1970s) and translations. Furthermore, as Sim Innes points out in his article here, the BBC is not alone in commissioning translations: An Comunn Gàidhealach did the same in the period up to 1950.

Although Gaelic drama has been well accepted in the community and on the radio, the development of professional theatre has been a slow process. Any initial failure to flourish is not due in any part to lack of talent or desire, but largely because financial constraints have not supported the longevity of various initiatives. The first professional Gaelic drama company – Fir Chlis – operated between 1977 and 1981. It was a full fifteen years before there was another professional Gaelic theatre group: Tosg, formed in 1996 under the directorship of Sìm MacCoinnich/Simon Mackenzie, produced and toured professional plays across the country, until its closure in 2007. More recently Theatre Hebrides (c. 2003-2010), under the directorship of Muriel Ann Macleod, a bilingual theatre

company based in Lewis produced several professional performances, one of which is under discussion here; Macleod is now involved in the film and theatre initiative Rural Nations CIC which also makes a contribution to the production of professional Gaelic-language drama.

The movement towards increased professional output has certainly gained pace and while much could still be done to improve the sustainability of Gaelic drama nationally, perhaps Hector Maclver who lamented the lack of drama in 1948 would have now been able to comment differently. Maclver, originally from the Isle of Lewis, was the head of English at the Royal High School of Edinburgh. (Thomson 2005: 60) He complained that too much Gaelic drama till that point tasted of 'uisge bàis' ('the water of death') but should taste of 'the strong water of life' and wrote as follows:

It is small wonder that the Gaelic Movement in Scotland has made so little progress up to the present, for we have omitted, or possibly refused, to develop the main medium to which practical men in all other countries have turned when they were heading towards a cultural renaissance: that is to say, the Drama. (Maclver 1948: 40)

As evidence of change having taken place, we have identified twenty-seven professional theatrical productions that have used Gaelic between the beginning of 2014 and the autumn of 2016. Some, although not all, of these have had national and indeed international tours. These plays have used the language in a multiplicity of ways and include: monolingual Gaelic plays; monolingual Gaelic plays which have made accommodation for non-Gaelic speakers through simultaneous translation or surtitles, mostly English translation, although on one occasion Dutch and on another British Sign Language; bilingual plays in both Gaelic and English. Thanks are due to Magaidh Nic a' Ghobhainn/Maggie Smith from the Lewis-based arts organisation Cabraich and to the actor Dàibhidh Walker for their help in filling in some of the omissions to the list that follows. The plays listed here include a number of works in progress and rehearsed readings but were all public performances. Plays performed in 2014 included: *Coinneach Tormod Mo Dhuine* by Alasdair Caimbeul/Alasdair Campbell; *Nach Fuar am Poll* by Chrisella Ross; *Air falbh leis na h-Eòin/ Away with the Birds* by Hannah Tuulikki; *Eun Beag Chanaidh/ A Little Bird Blown Off Course* by Fiona J. NicCoinnich/Fiona J. MacKenzie; *Peigi agus a' Bhreisleach Bhuan* by Meanbh-Chuileag; *MacBheatha* by Iain Dòmhnallach/Iain MacDonald; *Forcan Beaga/Little Forks* by Rebecca J. Sharp; *Dorus Dùinte* by Catriona Lexy Chaimbeul/Catriona Lexy Campbell; *In My Father's Words* by Justin Young; *Fantom* by Coinneach MacRath/Kenny MacRae. Plays performed in 2015 included: *Uisge Beatha Gu Leòr/Whisky Galore* by Iain Fionnlagh MacLeòid/Iain Finlay

MacLeod; *Às An Dorchadas* by Catriona Lexy Chaimbeul; *Sequamur* by Dòmhnall S. Moireach/Donald S. Murray; *Hallaig* by Iain Fionnlagh MacLeòid; *Os Mo Chionn Sheinn an Uiseag* by Eric J. Dòmhnallach/ Eric J. MacDonald. Plays performed in 2016 include so far: *Tom is Jerry* by Alasdair Caimbeul; *Briseadh na Cloiche* by Coinneach MacRath/Kenny MacRae; *Diuchdadh* by Marcas Mac an Tuairneir/Mark Spencer Turner; *Shrapnel* by Catriona Lexy Chaimbeul; *Aisling Oidhche Meadhan Samhraidh* by Iain Dòmhnallach/Iain MacDonald; *Fuaigh Fosgail* by Rona Dhòmhnallach/Rona MacDonald; *An Turas* by Eric J. Dòmhnallach; *Tioradh* by Marcas Mac an Tuairneir; *Solas* by Bob Kenyon, translated into Gaelic by Calum MacFhionghain/Calum MacKinnon, Coinneach MacRath and Dàibhidh Walker/David Walker; *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black Black Oil* by John McGrath; *Raon Phiobaireachd/Pibroch Field* by Iain Fionnlagh MacLeòid; *Togail Nàisean* by Martin O'Connor. Also, the number of productions would further increase if we were to include the Gaelic street theatre work performed by Ariel Killick since 2014. ¹

This tally given above is not inclusive of plays performed by amateur groups. An Comunn Gàidhealach runs annual amateur drama competitions for community groups, with the final held at the Royal National Mòd. In October 2016 Buidheann Dràma Cille Mhoire ('Kilmuir Drama Group') staged Iain Dòmhnallach's *Teàrlach Òg* ('Young Charlie') up against Buidheann Dràma Sabhal Mòr Ostaig's ('Sabhal Mòr Ostaig Drama Group') production of Iain Fionnlagh MacLeòid's *Salvage*.² The competitions run by the SCDA also occasionally feature Gaelic plays. For instance, the 2016 SCDA results list Buidheann Dràma Cille Mhoire as having competed with *An Royale* by Malcom Hendry.³ An Lòchran, a Gaelic arts organisation in Glasgow, has also recently worked towards providing further outlets for amateur community drama, in addition to the Mòd and the SCDA. In November 2014 they hosted an 'Oidhche Dràma Coimhearsnachd' ('Community Drama Night') in Glasgow which saw performances of Mabel NicArtair/Mabel MacArthur's *An Dileab* by Tìree Westend Players and Alison Lang's *Na Bi Tùrsach* by Sgioba Dràma Uibhist.⁴ An Lòchran also supported Sgoil Ghàidhlig Ghlaschu and Arthur Donald's Tog-I production of *Cò Ghoid an Nollaig* in December 2015. Comunn na Dràma has also worked to bolster amateur Gaelic drama. Thus, the number of Gaelic plays staged in the period between 2014 and 2016 begins to rise to at least forty if amateur and professional productions are considered together.

Over the course of the summer of 2015 Gaelic could be heard on stage in no less than five countries: the US, Scotland, Ireland, England and Belgium. Dundee Rep Theatre had taken its bilingual Gaelic and English production of *In My Father's Words* to Manhattan as part of 59E59 Theaters' annual Brits Off Broadway Festival. That play, set in Canada and

written by Justin Young, had premiered and toured in Scotland in 2014. The Gaelic text was produced by Iain Fionnlagh MacLeòid who also worked with the theatre company in preparation for the performances. New York critics and bloggers were impressed by the emotional intensity of the play and its ability to deal with complex issues without becoming didactic. Aonghas Pàdraig Caimbeul/Angus Peter Campbell's portrayal of Don, the bilingual character losing his communicative abilities due to dementia, is singled out for particular praise in many of the reviews.⁵ The play had premiered in Glasgow in June and toured in the Highlands and Islands throughout July of 2014, as part of the Culture strand of the Glasgow Commonwealth Games.⁶ It had been similarly well received in Scotland itself: Mark Brown's review in the *Sunday Herald* spoke of a play which was 'simultaneously, a powerfully universal expression of the migrant experience and a brilliantly particular window onto the history of the Scottish diaspora' with Caimbeul giving, 'a superb, nuanced and heartfelt performance as a man who, as his mind fades, rediscovers himself in his language and his past'.⁷ The review in *The Scotsman* noted that 'there's something powerful and fascinating, too, about the way this play uses screens and live surtitles to lead us into the great political and emotional gulf between languages and into the place between English-speaking and Gaelic worlds where Don has lost a vital part of himself, and briefly manages to reconnect with it, before the end.'⁸ Translation of Gaelic on-stage dialogue into English using either surtitles or simultaneous translation has become a common factor to many Gaelic performances and would itself be worthy of study.

The play that took Gaelic on stage in Northern Ireland, London, Edinburgh, and Leper in Flanders (with simultaneous translation into Dutch) in that same summer of 2015 was Dòmhnall S. Moireach's *Sequamur*. It is based on the role played by W. J. Gibson, the high-school rector (1894-1925) of the Nicholson Institute in Stornoway, in encouraging pupils to enlist to fight in the Great War. It was also very well received.⁹ A roll-call of the fallen from the parish where the play was staged concluded each performance, giving it a particular resonance to each locality.

Public sector support in Scotland from funders such as Bòrd na Gàidhlig, Creative Scotland and the erstwhile Pròiseact nan Ealan has made many of the plays listed possible. Local council organisations such as Highland Council, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and Glasgow Life have also provided support. A number of Gaelic organisations have also added to the development of Gaelic drama: Sabhal Mòr Ostaig in Skye has a Gaelic Writer-in-Residence scheme which has employed a number of playwrights; Fèisean nan Gàidheal has done a huge amount with youth theatre. Perhaps one of the biggest changes we see in the Gaelic drama sector is the extent to which national (otherwise English- or Scots-language)

theatre and playwriting bodies have played a part in nurturing Gaelic playwrights when this cannot be said of earlier periods. For instance, Playwrights Studio Scotland and the National Theatre of Scotland began a Gaelic playwright mentoring programme. Catriona Lexy Chaimbeul, describes her experience of Gaelic posts at Eden Court Theatre in Inverness and as Gaelic Associate Artist with the National Theatre of Scotland in the Forum piece in this issue. Therefore, these types of mentoring and funding streams now allow for playwrights such as Catriona Lexy Chaimbeul and Iain Fionnlagh to further build on their repertoire. However, as the former notes, sustainability and lack of training for Gaelic drama are still huge issues, despite the number of recent plays. Bòrd na Gàidhlig is, of course, not blind to these problems and indeed in October 2016, it put a public contract to tender for the production of a professional Gaelic drama which requires that it 'will incorporate community and professional level training opportunities'.¹⁰ The Forum piece, in which Muireann Kelly, Artistic Director at Theatre Gu Leòr, interviews Catriona Lexy gives real insight into the meaning and legacy of such support. However, it remains to be seen if the current funding models will allow for the kind of sustained long-term professional support needed for Gaelic-language theatre.

With regard to the individual peer-reviewed articles in this volume of the *International Journal of Scottish Theatre and Screen* the authors were free to contribute any topic related to Gaelic drama, but the contents reflect key areas of each of the movements noted in our survey of the history of Gaelic drama above.

Ian Brown returns to Archibald Maclaren's bilingual play *The Highland Drover* (1790). As noted by Brown, scholars have, in recent years, begun to scrutinise Maclaren's output. In his article, Brown carefully considers the implications for the audience in the late eighteenth century of a bilingual Gaelic/Scots or Gaelic/English play. He also adds to our understanding of the songs mentioned in the play, when only a song title is given rather than a full text. We are asked to imagine the reactions of bilingual but also monolingual audience-members in towns known to have hosted the play: Inverness, Aberdeen, Perth, Dundee and Greenock. Migrant workers from Highland areas were, of course, increasing in number in Lowland towns during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Brown argues convincingly that Maclaren seizes the opportunity in this play to engage with larger contemporaneous questions of language use and cultural identity and alienation. Language shift from Gaelic to English and implied loss is also embodied by a number of the characters. Indeed, Brown considers Maclaren to have used *The Highland Drover* to have entered into a 'metatheatrical' relationship with those audience members who could understand both languages. Brown, notes that non-Gaelic speakers would have missed the detail of particular language play and

miscommunication jokes. However, it is argued that Maclaren's well-received stage-craft would have imparted the comic intent of much of those sections. Brown highlights to us the potentially politically subversive message for the governance of the state in having the Gaelic speakers in the play succeed in out-manoeuvring those who would paint them as speaking a 'heathenish jargon'.

Aonghas MacLeòid takes us forward to the twentieth century and returns to the work of Dòmhnall Mac na Ceàrdaich / Donald Sinclair whose other works he has considered elsewhere (2014). MacLeòid's scholarship promotes Sinclair as one of the most important writers of the early twentieth century: although he has hitherto been better known as a poet and essayist, MacLeòid's article goes some way to reminding us that Sinclair was also an accomplished playwright with six plays to his credit. Although modern scholarship and readers know him more for his other genres, his skill as a playwright was greatly valued at the time by such earlier commentators as Hugh MacDiarmid (1934), Erskine (who published his plays in *Guth na Bliadhna*) and Edward MacCurdy (1953). MacLeòid's discussion of Sinclair's two historical plays demonstrates 'the social power of political drama': with one of the plays under scrutiny about the Clearances in Barra and South Uist and the other reaching further back to the time of the Jacobite Rising in 1745-46. MacLeòid believes these two plays represent Sinclair's most important contribution to Gaelic drama: he notes a sophistication in characterisation in them that was absent in other early plays which were largely humorous. He discusses how the various characters consider their motivations and actions and notes how Sinclair was not afraid to be adventurous in a somewhat provocative portrayal of Alasdair mac Mhaighistir Alasdair in *Crois-Tàra* ('*Fiery Cross*'). MacLeòid demonstrates that Sinclair's use of historical themes made a contribution to contemporary debates in Gaelic society and as such these plays should be of interest to anyone with an interest in Gaelic society at the start of the twentieth century.

Susan Ross's important work on Gaelic drama during the first half of the twentieth century moves us beyond dismissal of the whole corpus until 1950, as flabby or whimsical and ultimately more of a showcase than drama. She includes a new preliminary checklist of surviving published plays from the period; it includes seventy items. She uses this archival work to probe questions of Gaelic identity in the plays and, rewardingly, gives us a glimpse of the ways in which a whole host of social and political concerns could be tackled. Many of the Gaelic playwrights of the period were of Highland origin but resident in Lowland cities and Ross deftly demonstrates that the perceived dichotomy between Gàidheal/Gall (Highlander/Lowlander) was much used. These portrayals often had Gaels as more wholesome and community-minded than their new Lowland neighbours. Thus, as she points

out, many Gaelic writers were themselves influenced by the romantic Celtic Twilight view of rural Gaels as inherently noble and more in tune with nature and the past. Indeed, depictions of the injustices of the Highland past are also examined by Ross. She concludes that, while there is much sentimentalism, there are also powerful plays that question the notion of relationships between Gaels and the 'establishment'. Indeed, Ross also asks us to consider differences in the staging of Highland life when done in English as opposed to Gaelic. She argues that, when done in Gaelic, Highland life can be represented as less Edenic. Ross's study is a major step forward for scholarship on Gaelic drama and is likely to become a reference point for those interested in the history of Gaelic theatre in the early twentieth century.

Sim Innes focuses on the same time period (up until 1950) as Ross with a survey of plays translated into Gaelic from other languages. Innes also produces a new checklist of the corpus of extant published translations. A number of the published translations omitted detail on title and author of the original play. Therefore, archival work presented here produces an important guide to further research. Innes also demonstrates that a much greater number than previously thought of translations was performed during the period, including plays by Ibsen and Chekhov. However, many of the translations appear not to have been subsequently published. Innes builds on earlier scholarship on Scottish dramatic translations and uses theoretical approaches in order to examine the plays using a three-fold framework: Gaelic translations of plays which retain a foreign setting, thus presenting the audience with 'otherness'; Gaelic translations of plays which were already set in the Highlands in the original; Gaelic translations which 'domesticated' away from the original foreign setting. The earliest of the translations is Katherine Whyte Grant's translation from German, in the 1890s, of Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*. It retains the foreign setting and Innes argues that Grant's agency as translator allowed her to present subversive comment on injustice and land tenure for her nineteenth-century Gaelic audience. The chapter moves on to study translations into Gaelic of the kind of play originally written for the Scottish National Players: plays with an existing Highland and mostly historical setting. These present a fascinating case study since the Gael was already the 'other' in the original English-language or Scots-language play. Indeed, presentation of the linguistic alterity of the Highlands was often a key concern of the originals. Gaelic translators developed a number of strategies in order to soften the most unpalatable assertions about the Highlands and to cope with the portrayal of linguistic plurality; some of these translator strategies were more successful than others.

While some of the articles in this volume have been concerned with individual writers, others have looked at particular movements or topics: one of the latter is Michelle Macleod's article on manifestations of existential and absurdist themes in drama of the 1960s and 1970s. The article considers plays by Fionnlagh MacLeòid/Finlay MacLeod, Donaidh MacillEathain/Donnie Maclean and Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn/Iain Crichton Smith: Macleod is keen to show that the writers of these mostly unpublished works should be held at the same level of esteem as the innovators of modern poetry, short story and the novel in Gaelic. Macleod explores themes and criticism from contemporaneous European works and compares them to her selected Gaelic-language plays: for example MacLeod's characterisation in 'Ceann Cropic' is compared to that in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*; Maclean's portrayal of isolation in 'An Dall' is compared to Ionesco's in *The Lesson* and Smith's *A' Chùirt* is compared to Sartre's *Huis Clos*. Smith's skill as a writer, in other genres, is unquestionable, although his skill as a dramatist is less well-known. Finlay MacLeod is also known for his work in other genres, but he has probably written more plays than anything in other genres: Macleod's critique here of just two of his plays gives some indication of his mastery in the dramatic genre. Of the three writers considered by Macleod, Maclean will probably be less well-known outside drama practitioners in the Gaelic community: Macleod hopes that her scholarship of his work here and elsewhere and the relative ease with which his works are available, following the posthumous publication of his collected works, will mean that more people become familiar with his dramaturgical skills.

Although none of the articles in this volume purport to analyse the staging of any plays in detail, Emma Dymock's goes furthest in studying the dramaturgy of the two plays which are the focus of her article. Her bold discussion of Tormod Calum Dòmhnallach/Norman Malcolm MacDonald's *Anna Chaimbeul* (c. 1977) and *Roghainn nan Daoine* developed by Wright, MacLeod and Banks for Theatre Hebrides in 2010 focuses our attention on Gaelic-language theatre as acts of and for the community. While the style of each of the plays is very different, the former a short yet highly stylised reimagining of a traditional Gaelic song and the latter a much longer exploration of 13 themes related to Gaelic history and tradition, Dymock sees in them similarities because of their focus on community and willingness to experiment with form. Dymock demonstrates that in both plays the community exerts power over the individual: even in *Anna Chaimbeul* which is essentially about the love between a man and a woman, Dymock sees the Seanchaidh as a confessor figure to whom sins must be revealed and at all times on the stage there is a chorus listening and reacting. Dymock compares this particular incident to a scene in *Roghainn nan Daoine* in which religious testimony is shared. Her discussion of community and identity interweave meaningfully: citing Macleod (2008), she uses these two pieces to

show how drama breaks down barriers (in the case of *Roghainn nan Daoine* quite explicitly demonstrated through the dismantling of a significant stage prop) to stake a claim to be the natural literary successor to the ceilidh-house.

While we cannot claim to be heralding a Gaelic cultural renaissance, perhaps Hector MacIver would have approved of the progress that this special volume of *IJOSTS* demonstrates for scholarship on Gaelic drama. The research collected here presents some welcomed 'strong water of life' to the study and promotion of Gaelic drama. We also hope that it will stimulate others to produce further research into the rich stream of Gaelic written and performance culture.

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¹ For details see <http://www.independentstateofhappiness.com/index.php/en/>

² At the previous Mòd in October 2015 Cille Mhoire had taken first prize in the competition with Sgioba Dràma Uibhist ('Uist Drama Team') and Cluicheadairean Thioradh ('Tiree Players').

³ http://scda.org.uk/?page_id=377

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=591246004334680&set=gm.1498181323788297&type=3&theater>

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⁷ <https://scottishstage.wordpress.com/2014/06/30/reviews-in-my-fathers-words-the-yellow-on-the-broom-sunday-herald/> ;

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⁸ <http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/culture/theatre/theatre-review-in-my-father-s-words-glasgow-1-3452899>

⁹ Reviews available online include: <http://danamag.org/leanamaid-leirmheas-air-sequamur/> ;

<http://www.irishnews.com/arts/stage/2015/10/01/news/review-squamous-eastside-arts-festival-249049/>

¹⁰ http://www.publiccontractsscotland.gov.uk/search/show/search_view.aspx?ID=OCT260884