

Three One-Woman Epics: The Political Performer

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In the one act play, *Plugged in to History*, written in 1972 the main character Kay, says:

When I read the papers, I feel plugged in to history. I feel the course of events coursing through my veins. I feel taken over, crushed, by many men. I feel occupied, a house, squatted in, defiled. I feel like a deserted ball-room being defecated in by a halted army. I feel like South America after the Yankees have finished with it, like Dresden after the bombing. I feel like a shed of cats. I feel like a mid-night zoo. I feel like a clump of trees outside a barracks, full of soldiers in rough khaki having under-age village tarts. I feel like Pompeii the next morning. I become a human news-tape, mile after mile of me, torn out, ripped off, abandoned. Do you know why? Do you begin to? It's because I feel everything, all the way through me.¹

Kay transpires as a precursor to the characters in a series of one-woman plays written by McGrath and performed by Elizabeth MacLennan in the 1990s and in 2001-2. These plays, the last that John McGrath was to write, bear the mark of his relationship to history as the above title suggests. They are also a homage to the significance of the performer in his work. *Watching for Dolphins* (1992), *The Last of the MacEachans* (1996) and *Hyperlynx* (2001) were all co-created with MacLennan and all exhibit some of the concerns that have marked McGrath's work. In many ways they can be seen to bring together his main pre-occupations; *Watching for Dolphins* deals with the activism of the sixties and seventies from the perspective of the nineties; *The Last of the MacEachans* revisits the notion of the 'organic community' and the relationships between local and international cultures; and *Hyperlynx* deals with the impact of globalisation on our lives and structurally links that to the events of September 11. All these plays cover huge historical movements. They are epic in their scale and all are performed by a single actor. I am interested in examining how the scale of the themes covered is translated into theatrical conventions for performance. In other words how these characters are connected to the historical process and what kind of languages of performance this approach has helped to create.

McGrath has repeatedly stated that his theatre is markedly different from Brecht's. His references to Brecht appear more out of a sense of duty and almost always reluctantly. On the one hand, he might be responding to the ways Brecht and 'Brechtian' aesthetics have been appropriated throughout the cold war to signify anything and everything about political theatre. There are surely many traditions in political performance beyond the Brecht/non-Brecht divide. On the other, in terms of performance conventions McGrath's work is in dialogue with traditions that Brecht was not particularly interested in like his whole engagement with popular culture, his borrowing from television and cinema and so on. One of the ways in which his work is significantly different from Brecht's, is in his use of dramatic 'character'. I would like to delineate this particular aesthetic through a reading of these one-woman plays. Thematically and formally epic, these recent plays are a continuation of the

experiment in dramatic character initiated by early plays like *Plugged into History*. It is a language of performance that has been created through a life time cooperation with Elizabeth MacLennan. Her contribution to McGrath's particular aesthetics of political theatre cannot be overestimated. At the same time, since the themes of all these plays are grand and historical, the notion of character proposed is one that constantly negotiates between the personal and the political, between the local and the international.

Like Kay, the protagonists of these plays combine an instinctual, almost physical, relationship to history with an emotional and intellectual approach. Interestingly enough, they are not simply 'epic' characters in the received sense of the term. They are psychological in at least one sense; they rely on a coherent reading of character in order then to transgress it. They all flirt with what would traditionally be interpreted as 'madness'. They have sides to them, which are quirky, unstable and unreliable. At times they consider drastic measures, like violence to confront the historical issues raised. They are complex and contradictory, eliding between psychological moods and political analysis. Kay, like Reynalda, Meg and Heather in *Hyperlynx* are certainly more than naturalist characters or even strictly 'epic' types. They seem to borrow from both traditions in a combination of narrator, role, character and performer. The bringing together of all these conventions creates a type of performance through which the personal life of the role and historical life she represents fuse into one. The resulting performance, however, cannot be reduced to its components. It equally requires a complex reaction on behalf of the audience.

Watching for Dolphins was first performed at the Museum of Scotland in 1992 as part of a broader series of events organized by MacLennan that dealt with the cultural and political identity of Scotland. Reynalda is a woman in her early fifties who 'was brought up in one of the best English, radical, non-conformist intellectual families, but has gone through a lot since then. She has played her part in most of the liberation struggles and revolutionary movements of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, and through committing herself to them more completely than most, has learnt from her experiences a great deal more than her limited background might imply'. When the play opens Reynalda is about to open her grandmother's bungalow in Wales as a Bed-and-Breakfast. It is her way of coping with the New Economy of the nineties. Her only commodity is herself and her heritage so she decides to put it up for sale. Or does she? This is not a straightforward tale of compromise and survival. While Reynalda is preparing the three-course meal for the opening night of her B+B we get a survey of the politics of the left from the 1960s to today. It is not always a pleasant journey that we are asked to follow. From the grand gestures and aspirations of the 1960s Reynalda is reduced to running a small private business:

Demonstrations, rallies, meetings, car-stealing,
border-hops, failed kidnappings, graffiti
campaigns: I've gone through most of them in
my time - but this little gesture is the most
obscene. I'm afraid of it. I don't want to do it.
But...²

But there is more to Reynalda than we are led to believe. As this is not simply a confessional monologue Reynalda becomes a kind of kaleidoscope through which we view different aspects of the whole left cultural project of the sixties and

seventies. And for this she relies on the conventions of the epic tradition. However, there are other sides to Reynalda, sides that complement but also sometimes undermine the epic bravura in its forms and in its grand historical thematic sweeps. The first word that Reynalda utters is 'mouth-watering' and from then on we enter a physical, bodily world of culinary and other pleasures. She says:

Mouth-watering! They've got to be drooling for it like
Pavlov's dogs... when I think of all the bodily functions the
average B&B has to absorb - Appalling to think what might
go on in my little bungalow... Mouth-watering will probably
be the one to encourage ... B&B may only be ten pounds, but
'Evening meal' at eight pounds 50 - there's where I make
serious money!

The question is: will it be tonight?
I mean, will anyone stop? Come in?
Stay?³

It is this multi-faceted aspect of Reynalda that makes her go beyond the epic tradition in performance. Her physical, bodily side together with her utopian tendency make her more than a clear-cut and direct spokesperson for the cultural left of the 1960s and 1970s. The play concludes with two imaginary conversations she has with two different sets of guests. These are Judge and Frau Schenker and Vice President and Mrs Offaly. The judge was involved in the Baader Meinhof trials and Joe Offaly 'works for a firm that once owned all the bananas in Nicaragua, what a lot of bananas, a lot of copper in Chile and millions of acres of sugar-cane in Cuba!'. For obvious reasons these two couples become emblematic of everything that Reynalda has been opposing all her life. The startling twist at the end which gives this play a slightly fantastic edge is that she is contemplating assassination. She ends with:

Judge and Frau Schenker,
Vice President and Mrs Offaly
I am your servant.
I am your assassin...?⁴

How are we to read this final evocation of violence? Has she been taken over by her fantasy? Is this a final gesture of desperation or is it a legitimate reaction to her predicament and to the historical dimension it carries? Since it comes at the end it carries a certain gravitas that then is read back into the rest of the play. All the one-woman plays referred to here carry moments such as these where the protagonist transgresses, has flights of fancy or madness. Like Kay who feels the historical process with its ruins and catastrophes running through her veins, all these characters are 'plugged into history'. This, however, does not only give them insight, knowledge and hope it also unsettles them, it shakes up their being, physically and emotionally. It also comments on the aspirations that these characters have about progress, hope and change. McGrath's unflinching faith in human agency and its ability to change the world for the better is clearly punctuated by these moments of negativity. These in turn are always read against an equally stubborn faith in the 'principle of hope'. Reynalda says:

I went on a boat to Cyprus once, from
Marseilles. As we rounded Sicily, there
appeared a school of dolphins, playing with us,

roving freely through the warm seas, frisking like kittens, having fun, moving as one... Then, just as suddenly, they went away. I spent the rest of the voyage standing at the rail, hoping to catch another glimpse.

I feel like that now. Every night I read the newspapers, watch my telly, phone my friends - 'just to keep in touch'. But I stand here now, at the rail, at 52, watching for dolphins. I scan the sea, but it's polluted, empty. But they are there. They will come.⁵

This almost Romantic hopeful aspiration is inflected by the last word of the play which is 'assassin'. Throughout his working life McGrath has been associated with Marxist or at least socialist aesthetics. He sees cultural practices as sites of struggle and critique. However, it needs to be stressed that he has always been attracted to the 'unorthodox' Marxists like Benjamin, Bloch and most recently Cornelius Castoriades. All these thinkers embrace the Enlightenment but also see its other side. This dialectic of the Enlightenment recognizes the great discourses of emancipation and critique but also sees violence, oppression and empire as part-and-parcel of the same project. They are not simply an aberration, a lapse in judgment or an abuse of power they are constitutive elements of Enlightenment thinking. And it is this double process of evoking history as a nightmare and as a site of hope and change that I would claim these characters embody. McGrath writes in a recent lecture, one of the last he was to give, on the limitations of our received tradition of democracy:

First of all, a democracy needs Borders: a demos or community seeking to run itself on democratic lines draws a boundary, and almost all those within are citizens with rights and responsibilities. Those excluded are non-citizens. Exclusion however is both geographical, i.e. those outside the borders, and internal, i.e. certain people within. Who is included, who is excluded, is a site of contestation, now as it was in Ancient Greece.⁶

And it is this landscape of democracy as a site of contestation that these characters inhabit. This allows them to at once enact the principle of hope while also evoking the horrors that form part of the same democratic inheritance. Equally important for the purposes of a Marxist aesthetic is McGrath's evocation of a 'social imaginary', as the phrase has been interpreted by Castoriades. This grants culture and particularly theatre, in all its collective and civic dimension, a privileged position in the construction of a historical consciousness. Castoriades writes, in a section also quoted by McGrath:

I hold that human history - therefore also the various forms of society we have known in history - is in its essence defined by imaginary creation... Each society creates its own forms. These forms in turn bring into being a world in which this society sees itself and gives itself a place. It is by means of them that society constitutes a system of norms, institutions in the broadest sense of the term, values, orientations, and goals of collective life as well as of individual life. At their core are to be found in each instance social imaginary significations, which also are created by each society and which are embodied in its institutions.⁷

It is this heightened position to the whole category of the 'imaginary' which can be interpreted as the 'creative', without necessarily resorting to the sublime, that McGrath finds attractive in the thought of Castoriades. Also the structural connection that his work makes between the individual and the collective is crucial for McGrath's notion of character. Moreover, Castoriades' late work which is an attempt to reconcile history, particularly in its Marxist renditions, and psychoanalysis proves very useful for McGrath.⁸ Quoting from the same lecture McGrath reinforces his faith in the main tenants of the project of the Enlightenment. He writes:

I can't end there. Apart from being a ridiculous optimist, I embrace Ernest Bloch's Principle of Hope, and believe the dialectic of society can never be stopped or suppressed for too long...

From all of this you may detect that I am brooding on a new play. I have always argued that a writer needs to reinvent the theatre every time he or she writes a play.⁹

The last play that McGrath wrote, and probably the one he was brooding over while reading Castoriades, was *Hyperlynx*. Again it features a female protagonist through whom we get a sustained critique of globalisation. Heather is a high-ranking civil servant who works for MI5. She has been asked to investigate the anti-globalisation movements but somehow gets too involved and starts to see the point of the protesters. She has plans, or fantasies to act as a type of double agent who will somehow blow the whistle on the multi-nationals. The events take place on September 11th, 2001 and while she is taking us through her dilemma she learns of the attack on the World Trade Centre. Indeed the play was originally written as a reaction to the events of Genoa 2001 and a second act was added after the September 11th attacks. The play is ingenious and almost unique in linking the two, globalisation and terrorism, in ways that most political analysts shy away from. Heather like Kay has unique insights into history. Again her experience of the violence of history is a physical and sensory one. She says:

I see the office window through the eyes of a 30 year old Yemeni suicide pilot, seeing the black girl, flying closer, closer to concrete and steel.

I see the ground rushing toward me as I leap from my window on the 98th floor.

I see a thousand people hurrying down a stairwell, they stop, they look, they see a whole building collapsing on them, huge lumps of concrete and steel, dropping onto them.

I see ten, twenty thousand sights only the condemned will see, their final visions of the world, in their last moments.

What cameras can never see.

I see what they see.

That is what death looks like...¹⁰

Her connection to the historical process is what makes Heather see beyond her own restricted world; it allows her to see what 'the condemned will see'. Like the experiences that run through the body of Kay, in *Plugged into History*, what we are shown is not a pretty sight. However, this is balanced against intellectual rigour and the clarity of the analysis that follows. The play ends on an unflinching note of optimism. After a survey of US foreign policy and the links between globalisation and terrorism, Heather decides to return to her office. It is there that she thinks she can offer most:

The worst crime of all is not seeing, not trying to understand, of blinding yourself

with your own lies.

America has done that since they shot the first Indian, took his land and called it civilisation. It is a land founded on genocide, and hypocrisy, still driven by it: perhaps this is where they really need help, with some clarity, honesty of thought, to put intellectual rigour above cosy self deception, by spelling out what is really happening to humanity.

I think I can go back to the office now.

To work.¹¹

And this stance underscores McGrath's fundamental belief in the power of knowledge and education, both basic principles of Enlightenment thinking. The call 'To work', which ends the play, is McGrath's answer to the old question 'What is there to be done?' However, we are not simply led to believe that it is a clear-cut matter of education. The death and destruction that we have witnessed earlier, through the same character, undermine the straight-forward call to more knowledge and enlightenment at the end. Indeed, I would claim that the dual quality that these characters enact might also pose a classic liberal dilemma; one that McGrath was fighting against but also working within all his life.

Kay, Reynalda, Heather and Meg (from *The Last of the MacEachans*) all have flights of fancy. They all flirt with transgression and they all have this physical/bodily relationship to history. This allows them to experience the horrors of the historical process in an almost empathetic manner. At the same time, they can step back, distance themselves from it and present us with a critical analysis. Both strands of presentation, I would claim, exert the same power on the character and the audience alike. And it is in this respect that they could be read as enacting a liberal dilemma. There is, so to speak, in McGrath's work the unflinching faith in the powers of progress, education, compassion, equality, and the desire to work with what is available, within the great liberal institutions. Parallel to this is the insight that these very institutions may have created many of the horrors that the characters are asked to address. The creation of this type of character is a way that this issue is tackled in terms of narrative. It might also be a gesture towards all the complications involved in working within welfare capitalism and the contradictions and possibilities that such a project may entail. Indeed, McGrath's work can be and is emblematic of the relationships between the so-called 'counter-culture' of the 1960s and 1970s and the overwhelming demise of welfare capitalism. And it is an arena of politics and culture about which he had a lot to say.

All these characters inhabit such dilemmas and contradictions and it is their multi-faceted nature that makes them appealing and very 'actorly'. Indeed they allow the actor to take risks, to challenge the audience and to display the art of acting in all its dimensions. In writing these pieces with a specific performer in mind McGrath allowed for the art of the performer to also interact with all the themes and forms displayed on stage. The role of the performer herself and the possibility of the 'political performer' is examined and experimented with. These one-woman plays in their combination of epic, psychological and stylized acting create a kind of language of performance that is at once distancing and emotive. The relationship to history that this mode of acting represents tends to be more complex than the direct 'resurrection' of historical figures for the purposes of the stage. Drew Milne¹² argues that the evocation of 'real' historical figures in McGrath's later work (*Border Warfare* and *John Brown's Body*) flirts too closely with traditional, and somewhat

conservative, farce. This he argues sets up a difficult relationship with the past and tends to turn characters into caricatures. What was once a historical tragedy turns into theatrical farce, to paraphrase Marx's words. The characters of these one-woman shows propose a notion of character that is markedly more complex and contradictory. Through the specific working relationship with the performer, the kinds of characters presented in these plays propose a critical relationship towards history, towards the art of acting itself and towards the audience.

The Last of the MacEachans was presented at the Theatre Workshop in Edinburgh during the Fringe in 1996, at the Citizens Theatre in April 1997 and then toured Ireland, France and Italy. It was performed almost simultaneously to McGrath's adaptation of David Lindsay's *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaits, A Satire of the Fourth Estaitte*. This play deserves a study in itself for its uses of satire and farce for the purposes of political critique. *A Satire* was performed at a huge, newly opened conference centre as part of the so-called 'official Festival', while *MacEachans* played in a small venue on the Fringe, underlining a dynamic that is always present in McGrath's work about high and low cultures and about the relationships between central, hegemonical cultures and peripheries. Indeed these are the themes that *The Last of the MacEachans* revisits. Through Meg, who is quite literally the last of the MacEachans, McGrath and MacLennan interrogate another long-standing concern of theirs, the notion of the 'organic community' as this has been termed by Antonio Gramsci, amongst others. In his quest for a language for popular theatre, outlined his two major books *A Good Night Out (1981)* and *The Bone Won't Break (1990)*, the relationships to popular culture, to concepts of nationhood and organic communities forms a central thematic and methodological category. However, this has always been an area of Marxist aesthetics that has aroused much controversy and debate. The notion that popular culture is almost always and almost inherently critical is a dubious one at best and has been contested by McGrath himself. The relationship to 'traditional', 'organic', and primarily 'local' cultures is another matter altogether as it is one that has fuelled many a 7:84 play. And Scotland, particularly during the years of Thatcherism, proved a very attractive site of the unfolding of all these issues. Again the relationship that McGrath's project proposes between local and international cultures, between nationhood and straight-forward nationalism deserves a study in its own right.

Meg MacEachan is a character that enacts some of the tensions that such a vexed relationship to tradition may entail. Through her relationship with her son, a fencer and occasional poacher we see her sometimes hilarious, sometimes painful relationship to the North Highlands. The play opens with Meg watching *Braveheart* on video. As she talks us through the Hollywood version of Scottish history with the predictable stereotypes and clichés she is also introducing some of the main concerns of the play: cultural identity, multiculturalism, the sense of locality, globalisation, the need for change and adaptability. The fact that she does so through the use of television is significant. Television for McGrath's generation is another cultural site of contestation. And it figures dominantly throughout all three plays. The ways television is alluded to no longer points to the high hopes and aspirations of the 1960s and 1970s. McGrath is part of a generation of writers for whom television presented a great challenge. It offered a way of using popular culture critically and it reached a mass audience. Indeed, it was hailed as the alternative national theatre, to use Raymond Williams's phrase. The writings of

Raymond Williams and McGrath himself explore the formal possibilities and critical potential of this popular medium. McGrath writes in *A Good Night Out*:

Television drama is a greatly under-explored area. Most of the attempts to grapple with it seem to me to have either misunderstood or ignored completely the nature of the communication taking place: but television drama, in this country at least, exists as a relatively powerful social force and as a challenge to every dramatic writer who is at all concerned with writing for a mass audience.¹³

Writing the above in the 1980s McGrath already had accumulated nearly twenty years of television work. The hugely successful *Z-Cars* which he wrote in collaboration with Troy Kennedy Martin was an early indication of the impact that television could have on the alternative culture movement. The televising of *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* proved a high moment in the history of British television drama. John Caughie suggests that the televising of *The Cheviot* presented a model for resolving TV's fraught relationship with theatre and for creating a form of television drama which underlined the progressive potential of the medium. It brought together a variety of forms like drama, historical reconstruction, documentary, reportage and theatrical performance. It is worth quoting extensively from Caughie's analysis:

For the development of the formal effectiveness of documentary drama, *The Cheviot*... represents a radical separation of the discourses of the documentary: the television production is at the same time a drama, a documentary on the way in which the theatrical performance circulated in the Highlands, a historical reconstruction, and a documentary on working conditions in the North Sea oil industry. The elements are not integrated to confirm and support each other, but are clearly separated out and allowed to play against each other... It is the possibility of this collision of documentary drama, of the refusal of integration, which makes the documentary drama a potentially political form.¹⁴

McGrath continued his relationship with television. He was on the Channel 4 board in the early 90s. In 1992 he wrote and directed *The Long Roads* which was specially written for BBC 2. This was a 'state of the nation' film, tracing the effects of Thatcherism on people's daily lives. It is the story of a dying Scotswoman and her husband who set out on a journey from the North of Scotland to London to visit their children in various parts of the country. It has been compared to Ozu's *Tokyo Story*, and indeed it examines relationships between generations, between local and central cultures, using the format of the road movie (in this case with the help of British Rail).

It is a similar terrain that Meg MacEachan covers only the references to television in this and the other one-woman plays are less celebratory and positive. The reference to *Braveheart* is not coincidental as it underlines how the whole idea of an 'organic culture' can be appropriated by Hollywood and the culture industry. The references to television in *Watching for Dolphins* are even more scathing and critical. The optimism about the emancipatory and critical potential of television folds over in this play into the narcissism of postmodernism. Reynalda is attacked by a Channel 4 crew who want to make a documentary about her life. Although formally the presence of C4 allows Reynalda to create new characters from her previous life, the framing that this provides in the end acts as a raid on her sense of self, as she is made to constantly repeat her 'failures' for the sake of the filming:

Oh dear me
NO -
CUT - Thank you very much...
(Own voice) No, I can't get teaching work
anywhere ... Am I sorry? Only for our society,
and for the children -
What? Repeat? Oh for sound - OK... No, I
can't get teaching work anywhere ... Again?
Must I? No I can't get teaching work
anywhere...¹⁵

Gone are great aspirations that television presented in the 60s and 70s. Heather in *Hyperlynx* says:

When I watch television I feel I am vomited over: bellyful after bellyful of yesterday's images in half-second pieces; an endless rush of stale, foul-tasting verbiage from prurient, cynical, nasty celebrities. I feel drenched with gobbits of inane chatter from screaming, cackling, hopped-up youths. I feel I've been coated with a dog's dinner of old lies and new superficialities. I don't want to, I can't go home to my TV. I'd rather go home to stare into an alchies' lavatory pan.¹⁶

This is quite a damning portrayal of a medium that was once considered as potentially radical. I would claim that the same critical relationship is established towards 'organic and traditional' culture as this is filtered through the character of Meg MacEachan. The relationship she has with her son is a complex and sometimes contradictory one. It is very visceral; both warming and hurtful. Her son leaves the Highlands after a drunken night and ends up in Pictou, Canada. However, he is not presented in heroic terms. In leaving he is also leaving a son behind. Meg hopes his mother will let her see him although she claims she wouldn't be surprised if she didn't. Like her relationship with the North Highlands and, I would claim, like McGrath's relationship with 'traditional and organic cultures' (particularly various traditions of Scottish culture) Jimmy, Meg's son, is both a source of wonder and redemption but also sadness and disappointment. She says towards the end of the play:

Whenever one of the old folk pass on, we always say 'there aren't many left like her, or him'. And now it's a bitty more true than ever it was... and as the place changes, so the natives are hunted out, like the last of the Mohicans, driven out by the White Settlers... I don't say it with hate, nor a desire for the ethnic cleansing - though there's a few Gaelic Serbs over in the west: no I say it with sadness... that's all... Nor can I say my Jimmy was driven out by them. It might as easily be my doing... No, he's away to Nova Scotia the same way he went to the pub, or up the hill, or away to Inverness, the way his will pushed him, and - aye - nothing could hinder him.¹⁷

This is a very different analysis of immigration from that presented in *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*, and the overall tone of the play like that in *Watching for Dolphins* reflects the sadness that Meg experiences. In general both these pieces have been read as elegiac; the first as a melancholy reflection of the failures of the 1960s and 1970s and the second as a contemplative reading of McGrath's commitment to 'organic communities'. These readings seem to dwell on only one aspect of these plays. Yes, they are more melancholy and self-critical. This need not be a negative trait. These pieces all rely on the impact of the performer. Their self-reflective and somewhat brooding side is counterbalanced or

complemented by the presence and impact of the performer herself. Also the pieces themselves could be read in dialogue with each other as there is a marked intertextual relationship both in terms of the character and the overall narrative.

Despite her sadness at witnessing a way of life die Meg MacEachan is no lamenting character. She has no hesitation in leaving the North Highlands and starting a new life in Cape Breton. She fantasizes about her new life and still dreams of dying in Jimmy's arms. Her account of this sequence is very lyrical and has a slightly Strindbergian flavour to it.

I'll make patchwork quilts through the long winter nights
for Margaret to sell to the posh ethnic boutiques in Toronto,
and I'll keep a weather eye open for a wealthy widower with
a wee bum and a sense of humour to keep me entertained
though I'll not marry him unless he plays the fiddle, and
then I'll practice on my old accordeon and we'll play
Highland music for the tourists and the weddings and the
Burns nights, and at one of the Hogmanays in the far
distant future, Jimmy will roll in with a bottle of Famous
Grouse and we'll dance till I drop, and I'll be ninety-two and
I'll have gone far too far and I'll have a great big heart
attack and I'll die in his arms.

....

And that'll be me.¹⁸

Again Meg's character surfaces as a highly poetic but stubborn and determined creation. Her commitment to a sense of locality and identity can be easily moved geographically. Indeed it moves from a sense of tradition which is rooted in time and place to a reading of culture as something that results from immigration and diaspora. She doesn't bat a eye-lid at the appropriation of her local culture by the tourist trade. Indeed there are ways in which her 'escape' to Canada can be read as parallel to some of the 'white-settlers' retreats to the North Highlands. Just as Heather's final call 'to work' acts as a comment on the play that preceded it, Meg's final statement to the audience is all about change, adapting and hope. In a self-mocking and ironic gesture that quotes the criticism of McGrath's work that sees it as 'moralising' she ends with:

They say there was a bird that lived on an island in the
Indian Ocean, and it never learnt to do what every other
bird has to do: it never learnt to fly ... So it grew bigger and
fleshier and its wings grew shorter and stumpier, and it laid
its eggs on the ground, until one day some Dutch sailor
found the island and hundreds of these dodos, that couldn't
fly away, and one of them fed thirty men, and the Dutch
sailors kept coming for more and more and more roast dodo,
fried dodo, boiled dodo, kippered dodo, pickled dodo, dead
dodo - until, in one hundred years there was not one dodo
left on the island, and that had been the only place they
were to be found, so there were no more dodoes left in the
whole wide world: they were extinct.
So the moral is: Learn to Fly.¹⁹

And, of course, birds migrate. The notion of identity and culture that is being examined here is one that relies on change, on shifts in populations, on conflict and

adaptability. It is more a hybrid view than one, which is grounded in geography or ethnicity.

Reynalda, Meg and Heather are all creations that have a strong intertextual connection. Thematically they voice McGrath's life-long concerns about issues of cultural politics, local and international identities, the workings of globalisation and terrorism. Together with *Reading Rigoberta*, an adaptation of Rigoberta Menchu's biography, which was performed in 1994, they form a group of plays that also explores McGrath's notion of dramatic character. This life-long experiment was conducted with Elizabeth MacLennan, a performer who has helped to forge this particular aesthetic. In his quest for a theatrical language for political theatre these plays point towards ways in which dramatic character can evolve. Using modes which are neither directly Brechtian nor straight naturalism these characters explore the relationships between the individual and history. They also, of course, explore the complex relationships between actor and playwright. McGrath was a prolific playwright, director, theatre theorist and political activist. These are aspects of his work that almost always figure in any analysis. Less attention has been paid to the ways all these ideas help to forge a specific aesthetic. These one-woman plays created with the collaboration of Elizabeth MacLennan are also experiments in the notion of the political performer. This dynamic relationship between performer and playwright has helped to create a very complex and sophisticated notion of 'dramatic character'; one that nods towards the epic tradition but also carries with it the legacy of McGrath's and MacLennan's own work.

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Endnotes

¹ See *Plugged Into History*, in *Plays and Players*, November 1972, p. viii.

² John McGrath, *Watching for Dolphins* (unpublished typescript, 1992), p.11. An edition of *Watching for Dolphins*, *The Last of the MacEachans* and *Hyperlynx*, published by Exeter University Press, is anticipated.

³ John McGrath, *Watching for Dolphins* (unpublished typescript, 1992), p.2

⁴ John McGrath, *Watching for Dolphins* (unpublished typescript, 1992), p. 28.

⁵ John McGrath, *Watching for Dolphins* (unpublished typescript, 1992), p.21.

⁶ John McGrath, *Naked Thoughts that Roam About* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2002), pp.231-2.

⁷Cornelius Castoriades, quoted from McGrath's notebooks, quoted in John McGrath, *Naked Thoughts that Roam About* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2002), p.234.

⁸ Cornelius Castoriades, *The Imaginary Institution of Society: Creativity and Autonomy in the Social-Historical World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997).

⁹ John McGrath, *Naked Thoughts that Roam About* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2002), p.239.

¹⁰ John McGrath, *Hyperlynx*, unpublished typescript, 2002, p. 32. An edition of *Watching for Dolphins, The Last of the MacEachans* and *Hyperlynx*, published by Exeter University Press, is anticipated.

¹¹ John McGrath, *Hyperlynx*, unpublished typescript, 2002, p. 44.

¹² Drew Milne, 'Cheerful History: the Political Theatre of John McGrath', *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol. xviii, part 4 (NTQ 72), November 2002, pp. 313-324.

¹³ John McGrath, *A Good Night Out* (London: Methuen, 1981), p.110.

¹⁴ John Caughie, in T. Bennett, S. Boyd-Bowman, C. Mercer and J. Woollacott (eds), *Popular Television and Film* (London: BFI/Open University, 1981), p. 349.

¹⁵ John McGrath, *Watching For Dolphins* (unpublished typescript, 1992), p.10.

¹⁶ John McGrath, *Hyperlynx* (unpublished typescript, 2002), p. 4.

¹⁷ John McGrath, *The Last of the MacEachans* (unpublished typescript, 1996), p.16. An edition of *Watching for Dolphins, The Last of the MacEachans* and *Hyperlynx*, published by Exeter University Press, is anticipated.

¹⁸ John McGrath, *The Last of the MacEachans* (unpublished typescript, 1996), p. 16.

¹⁹ John McGrath, *The Last of the MacEachans* (unpublished typescript, 1996), p. 17.