

The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil: Political Theatre and the Case Against Television Naturalism

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Introduction: Texts and Issues

The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil (hereafter *The Cheviot*) was the first production of 7:84 (Scotland) when in 1973 the new company spun away from the original 7:84 Theatre Company.¹ *The Cheviot* was not only the first but the most well-known and arguably the best, in all senses, of 7:84 (Scotland)'s Highland touring productions. As DiCenzo notes, '[c]ommentators almost unanimously agree that the productions after *The Cheviot* achieved nowhere near its success'.² On his recent death, obituaries of John McGrath invariably cited *The Cheviot* as a landmark achievement.³ In what became a fifteen-year commitment to making theatre for, and taking it to, the rural Highlands of Scotland, John McGrath's 7:84 (Scotland) project is, perhaps ironically, logged in history primarily for the quality of its first production. And there are reasons both for the initial success and for the duration of *The Cheviot* in memories:

In her cultural materialist account of the theatre production and 7:84 (Scotland)'s first Highland tour, DiCenzo (1996) documents the happy conjunction of a range of factors contributing to *The Cheviot*'s success as: an artistic venture, an alternative theatre company operation, a political strategy, a celebration with popular audiences and a critical success. The circumstances which gave rise to this initial achievement were gradually eroded on a number of fronts which accounts for the difficulties in sustaining subsequently the first impact. Given *The Cheviot*'s immediate prestige, it is perhaps not surprising that the stage show was quickly adapted for BBC's television drama strand, *Play for Today* [hereafter the *TV Cheviot*] in 1974. However, a version filmed for television might seem at odds with several of the key aims of the 7:84 project. Some of the very features which made *The Cheviot* such a distinctive cultural and theatrical phenomenon were not readily reproducible in the context of a television production system on which McGrath had consciously turned his back because 'the mass media, at the moment, are penetrated by the ruling class ideology'.⁴

The terms of the success of *The Cheviot*, and indeed the whole 7:84 (Scotland) venture, might be variously defined but, particularly to McGrath, they were very specific. The aim was to produce avowedly socialist theatre in an entertaining form and, in general terms, this entailed:

. a recognition of the potential of theatre for political intervention in the socio-political process;⁵

- . a collective, equitable and democratic approach to company organisation;
- . a language of performance accessible to 'working-class people';
- . playing in non-theatre spaces;
- . breaking down the bourgeois theatre's barrier between audience and performers;
- . taking theatre to people who typically did not have access to it.

I shall return to the question of theatre language and the capacity of television for intervention in the socio-political process but, on the face of it, a play on television cannot meet these conditions. The audience for national television at that time was conceived as broad and general rather than local and specific. The demographic (as it would today be termed) of a BBC1 audience in 1974 was less likely to be 'working-class' than that for the more popular/populist Independent Television channel.

In specific terms, the 7:84 (Scotland) *Cheviot* project entailed:

- . a company of politically committed cultural workers, on equal pay;
- . a sharing of all decision-making and production and distribution tasks;
- . collective creative process, though with recognition that different personnel had different strengths ('each according to his ability', perhaps);
- . drawing upon popular theatre traditions, particularly those of Scotland;
- . touring the Highlands village halls in a transit van with a minimal production crew;
- . inter-action with the audience, both in the performance style and the ceilidh afterwards.

To McGrath particularly, the working practices of the company were integral to the project. He believed that '[i]t is through its structures as much as through its product that [mainstream, building-based] theatre expresses the dominant bourgeois ideology'.⁶ The implication is that, in order to resist the 'dominant ideology', the means of theatrical production as well as theatre forms must be changed. The argument applies equally to television where, because of tight institutional constraints imposed - at the time of the making of the *TV Cheviot* - as much by the trades unions as by management, it was not possible to attempt the working basis of the 7:84 (Scotland) theatre company. On reflection then, it might seem puzzling that, having turned his back on national television⁷ because of its limitations in terms of socio-political intervention (see below) that McGrath would entertain the idea of a *TV Cheviot*. Having finally fulfilled with *The Cheviot* his political aims in a localised and specifically targeted touring theatre praxis after a decade of struggle to find the right conditions to build a political theatre, it seems odd for McGrath to return to TV drama.

The answer to this puzzle lies perhaps in two parts. McGrath subsequently spied an opportunity for a non-naturalist, politically challenging TV drama in a *TV Cheviot*, but the idea of an adaptation for *Play for Today* was in the first instance 'entirely accidental'.⁸ The decision was taken rather quickly and, as frequently proves to be the case when 'seminal' television productions are researched, the process of production involved serendipity.

Television director John Mackenzie saw *The Cheviot* and, like many others, was enthralled by the piece. He was impressed by the talent of the theatre company and struck particularly by the impact the piece had on a local audience just north of Glasgow. Experiencing live 'how moved they were',⁹ he wanted to try to convey through television to a broader public the extraordinary impact of the theatre event. Meeting McGrath subsequently, Mackenzie recalls a brief discussion of this idea but it was only when another *Play for Today* project fell through shortly afterwards that an opportunity arose.¹⁰ Executive producer Graeme Macdonald agreed to re-allocate the resources from the postponed project and Mackenzie, suddenly finding himself effectively producer and director of what became the *TV Cheviot*, revisited 7:84. Time was extremely tight and, fitting his vision to the circumstance, McGrath proposed:

to use the stage play as an alienating device. I didn't want to make television naturalistic soup out of what was a very determinedly anti-naturalistic piece. And I said it would have to be done in front of an audience because it was about the interaction between the stage and the audience. And that would give us the liberty then to cut away and shoot scenes on film which would help it along.¹¹

McGrath, working summarily with *Play for Today* story editor Ann Scott, quickly developed a screenplay which, after some deliberation within the BBC, went into production. Though there were occasional tensions between the two Johns over direction, McGrath acknowledges that Mackenzie was 'one of the few directors who've ever asked me into the cutting room because he knew what I was trying to do was not normal'.¹²

As the project developed, then, it is clear why, notwithstanding the constraints of the television medium, McGrath took the opportunity for a *TV Cheviot*. Devices of documentary realism, dramatised film inserts and, in particular, shots of audience members were used in an attempt to catch and convey the spirit of *The Cheviot* project in a more televisual manner. The juxtaposition between different forms was:

consciously Brechtian...Brechtianised television. It wasn't a Brechtian stage play, but it was a Brechtian way of approaching television.¹³

I propose in the final section of this essay to locate the *TV Cheviot* in the context of the seminal debate about television naturalism in the 1960s and early 1970s in which McGrath's views were influential. Prior to developing this perspective, however, it may be helpful, particularly to readers who may not have had access to the television adaptation (let alone the original theatre production), to give a summary account of *The Cheviot* and subsequently to detail features of its adaptation for television.

The Theatre Cheviot

The scope of *The Cheviot* is broad. It covers two hundred years of Scottish history from 'the Clearances' in the eighteenth century to the present day. It tells its story broadly in three sections indicated by the title, the Cheviot, the stag and the oil. The first recounts the eviction of highland crofters from the land to accommodate Cheviot sheep whose qualities of endurance and fine wool offered the prospects of lucrative incomes to landowners. As 'the highland exploitation chain-reacted around the world',¹⁴ many of the displaced highlanders found themselves as 'new world' settlers further serving colonialist interests. Section two deals with a different invasion in the form of Romantic tourism in which Queen Victoria and other 'Monarchs of the Glen' mythologised a wild nature in the Scottish landscape and culture, appropriating and re-shaping them for hunting, shooting and fishing. A coda to the second section updates cultural tourism to embrace 'The Crammem High Inn, High Rise Motorcroft', 'the "Frying Scotsman" All Night Chipperama' and 'with a wee ethnic bit - Fingal's Cafe'.¹⁵ The third section brings the play to its 1973 present-day and the American invasion of the oil-fields discovered initially in the North Sea off Aberdeen with subsequent prospecting in the West.

The first two sections of the narrative demonstrate how repeatedly in history the indigenous Scottish people have been displaced. Section three invites the audience to learn the lessons of that history and resist the new invasion and displacement by American oilmen. Thus, at a time when a debate about political form versus political content was raging in the theatre,¹⁶ *The Cheviot* is on one level a play with overt political content. However, *The Cheviot* does not exemplify Holderness's "'symptomatic" definition of political theatre, in which the matter of the play is simply the matter of "politics" as conventionally understood, irrespective of any political intention'.¹⁷

7:84's political stance is very evident in the structuring of the narrative and the selection of narrative material. For the company revisits history neither dispassionately nor to lament failures, but to learn its lessons and to disseminate them.

Unavoidable accounts of battles lost are off-set with specific examples of resistance against the forces of displacement, both literal and metaphorical. In respect of the Clearances, for example, the audience learns that:

Knockin, Elphin and Coigeach people made a stout resistance [to the evictions], the women disarming about twenty policemen and sheriff-officers, burning the summonses in a heap, and ducking the representative of the law in a neighbouring pool.¹⁸

When the Duke of Sutherland later tries to enlist men to fight the Russians, virtually nobody will be bought by his six golden sovereigns with an old highlander explaining that:

should the Tsar of Russia take possession of Dunrobin Castle, we couldn't expect worse treatment at his hands than we have experienced at the hands of your family for the last fifty years.¹⁹

Thus moments of what McGrath would see as the hopeful lessons of history reverberate throughout the narrative.²⁰

Closely related to the political content of *The Cheviot*, however, is the form of the piece. Though it is a scripted play, credited formally to John McGrath in the published versions,²¹ and is frequently referenced as a piece of 'political theatre', *The Cheviot* exemplifies McGrath's theory of a political theatre praxis outside established, building-based theatres and beyond the confines of the literary playscript. In a programme note to *Joe's Drum* (1979) McGrath reflected on his kind of theatre:

The kind of theatre which 7:84 has done a great deal to establish in Scotland is there to represent the realities of working class life and history directly to working class audiences, without translating it into the language of the middle class 'theatre' that has dominated our stages since the 1980s. It has its roots in the popular traditions of entertainment, and it takes the values of the working-class very seriously.²²

In form, *The Cheviot* is a fast-moving collage of songs, jokes, music hall-derived sketches, parodies, anecdotes and documentary material. Its moods shift quickly from broad humour, to sentiment (particularly in the Gaelic songs), to overt political statement, back to comedy and on to documentary evidence, emotionally powerful in its context. The framework of presentation is the popular Scottish entertainment form of the *ceilidh*. A fiddler opens proceedings as people gather and a dance follows the 'formal' presentation of the play. 7:84 (Scotland)'s typifying manner of direct address to the audience with specific local references aims to break down the barrier between actors' playing space and auditorium such that conversation, indeed political discussion, follows naturally from the engagement of the show. The result is indeed that educative 'good night out' explicated in McGrath's celebrated book.

A key strategy identified and advocated in *A Good Night Out* (1981) involves drawing on popular theatre traditions which in 'high culture' accounts are frequently effaced from history. Having 'stressed the paucity of tradition in Scottish drama'²³ in his account of Modern Scottish Literature, Bold belatedly recognises the music hall of Harry Lauder and Will Fyfe which McGrath draws upon in *The Cheviot*. Bold acknowledges that '[t]his popular tradition has never entirely vanished: the comedian Billy Connolly ... is virtually a bawdy reincarnation of Lauder'.²⁴ In McGrath's essay 'Towards a Working-Class Theatre'²⁵ not only are the features of the various strains of music hall, pantomime and working's men's club entertainment traditions expounded but a recognition is articulated of the importance of finding a form different from the dominant bourgeois literary conventions if a non-theatre-going audience is to be attracted.

The close relation between form and content, paying attention to local circumstances and entertainment modes, and the correspondence between the means of

production and reception, promoting an egalitarian forum for exchange of ideas, no doubt made *The Cheviot* the great success it proved to be on its rural Highland tour. At its best on McGrath's terms but in the words of Bold, 'the cast drew the audience into the action as if all present at a given performance were involved in an open conspiracy against authority'.²⁶

In the medium of television, however, this 'sense of locality, of identity, of cultural identity with the audience',²⁷ so central to the 7:84 (Scotland) project, was simply not possible. But, as noted, McGrath sought in the television adaptation to rely less on proximity to draw people into conspiracy in the village hall and more on the potential of Brechtian distancing (*Verfremdungseffekt*).

The TV Cheviot

The 1974 television adaptation follows the published *Cheviot* playscript quite closely, some small changes in the narrative order clarifying the line of the story. Although avoiding any meta-commentary, the presentation approximates to documentary coverage of a specific performance of *The Cheviot* at Dornie village hall. Although the overall impact rests on the juxtaposition of a range of modes quite rare in a television drama, sufficient familiar features of treatment remain to guide viewers in to the piece. The titles, initially under a pilot's voice-over, establish location with a distant image of Scotland as if on the display screen of a spacecraft, and then cut to a helicopter circling a castle later to be identified as the Dunrobin home of the Sutherlands. The arresting, though conventional, establishing grammar of Long-Shot to Mid-Shot to Close-Up takes viewers through a visual cross-fade under sea sounds to a coastal landscape which picks up in the distance the 7:84's white transit van approaching the venue. A sound cross-fade leads to a Close-Up of Allan Ross, the company's fiddler, playing the 'live' audience into Dornie, identified by the sign on the exterior wall of the village hall.

Before the television audience 'enters' the hall it is confronted by a shock of images. A montage challengingly links a JCB digger shot in Extreme Close-Up, a Scottish soldier and colourful explosion at sea. More specifically identifiable, an oil-rig, Cheviot sheep and a hunted stag visually prefigure the battles of *The Cheviot*: land clearance, cultural tourism and oil prospecting. The shooting of the stag is linked in sound montage to the shot of the gun which ignites the oil flare of the rig's exhaust pipe. This feature parallels an action in the playscript by Billy as '*Texas Jim*' who 'fires pistol as oil rig appears on the mountains'²⁸ of *The Cheviot's* touring theatre pop-up book set. This set is visible in the television version but is reduced by the dominant televisual conventions of Two-Shots, Mid-shots and Close-ups of performers to a vague backdrop.

Once the television audience is invited inside Dornie village hall, the performance is presented as if taking place as a theatre piece in front of the live audience. Three additional televisual strategies combine with the already mixed-mode of the theatre piece: live audience reaction shots cut into those documenting the performance; inserts of dramatised exterior action; and documentary-style Vox Pops. Technically the strategic inter-cutting between Close-Ups of the performers and members of the

audience is a simple and apparently seamless device. In an effort to recreate something of the sense of shared space and identity created by the form, content and performance style of *The Cheviot* in its *ceilidh* setting, individual audience members are picked out by the camera in a variety of responses. Elderly women sing along to the Gaelic songs. Rural working men, cigarette in mouth, are shown in rapt concentration.²⁹ The audience claps along with the livelier songs, and laughter is both audible and visible. In sum the audience is shown being entertained, moved and alerted whilst the television viewer is invited by the inter-cutting device to locate her or himself in a position of identity with the collective.

Perhaps two different impacts rub against each other in the close attention paid to the audience. On the one hand television viewers are drawn to identify with the pleasures taken in the village hall. On the other, they sit outside that space in their own homes and observe from a distance. Precisely because the theatre piece is constructed to have specific local appeal, the broader UK audience is to some extent excluded.

To take one specific moment, there is a whoop of delighted recognition of the represented ineffectualism - not to say the perceived collusion with the American invaders - of the representatives of the British government. In perhaps one of the most effectively comic political parodies - to judge by the audience response - Lord Polwarth is literally represented as a puppet of Texas Jim and Whitehall, 'a Government spokesman', in a song (to the tune of 'Lord of the Dance'), the final line of which observes:

But if you think I'm doing this for you
You'd better think again 'cos I'm a business-man too.³⁰

The immense swell of laughter and applause provides an interesting moment for the television viewer. Evidently, members of the Dornie audience know well that they have been sold out by these men, and their laughter and applause has a sense of recognition and shared feeling which I personally can observe but not entirely share. As a Sassenach outsider, I understand what is going on and share a political sympathy with the abused Scottish people but I do not share an embodied pattern memory of cultural history which informs the collective response in the village hall. I am suggesting here that the effect on the television viewer may be to afford a more analytic reading appropriate to a Brechtian distancing than the feeling of mutuality in Dornie hall itself. The political strategy deployed by McGrath in making the adaptation thus shifts somewhat between theatre and television.

Turning to the second key feature of the *TV Cheviot*, a range of television inserts shot on film punctuates the recording of the Dornie hall event. The first category of these consists of exterior reconstructions of historical events which are merely narrated in the theatre version. For example, there is a dramatised reconstruction of redcoat soldiers chasing a Scottish youth in order to remove his plaid. Similarly, the well-dressed gentleman figures of Sellars and Lock are shown in conversation riding fine horses across the land. In another example, a physical attack by the police on women resisting eviction in the Clearances is dramatised along with their victory of ducking the local constabulary in the river. For the most part the dialogue in these

film inserts follows that in the playscript though, on occasion, a voice-over (usually that of Bill Paterson) narrates.

In some instances, the visual inserts do more than merely make visual for television the events handled verbally in *The Cheviot*. Replacing Patrick Sellars' monologue and mock poems to heroic victory,³¹ an actor playing Sellars addresses the camera claiming that 'nobody suffered in the Clearances' whilst the camera pans across derelict crofts to pick up the splendour of Dunrobin castle. This montage invites the television audience to draw conclusions perhaps in a manner parallel to, but different from, the engagement constructed between performers and audience members in Dornie village hall.

Employing another device, the film insert illustrating resistance to the sheriff is intercut with Close-Ups of the Dornie audience joining in with the singing of 'The Battle of the Braes' in apparent political sympathy with its refrain of celebratory resistance.³² This selective editing and televisual inter-cutting of the audience response is repeated with hand-clapping to the refrain of the song (to the tune of 'I will go'):

But we'll fight
Once again
For this country is the people's
Yes we'll fight once again.³³

In the village hall, this strategic device of drawing on the audience's knowledge of traditional songs re-written with explicit political messages serves to involve the audience, indeed to rouse it into complicity with the theatre piece and its sentiments. On television, it functions less well in terms of constructing complicity but perhaps serves, as noted above, to create *Verfremdungseffekten*.

Whilst, then, some aspects of the *TV Cheviot* serve to create a television audience experience similar to that of the live theatre-goer, other aspects of the treatment have consciously different aesthetic strategies for a political end. The television audience must be differently addressed since it is patently not local and gathered together proximally to share a popular entertainment but is dispersed, fragmented in separate domestic spaces. Moreover, being predominantly not Scottish, members of the audience are unlikely to know the songs or share those aspects of Scottish nationalism on which *The Cheviot* undoubtedly draws to create that sense of 'open conspiracy against authority'.³⁴ Even if they know or pick up the refrains of the songs there can be no sense of community collectivity or 'communitas'. Though to some extent the Close-Ups of theatre performance and audience draw the television viewer into Dornie village hall, McGrath aimed to deploy an interruptus. Through the marked shifts in both theatrical and televisual modes a different kind of political awareness is promoted in the television audience reliant less on a heightened emotional awareness of shared history and more on a recognition through critical distanciation of what had happened, and is happening, to the Scottish people.

Another feature of the television version, in one sense related to the playscript but in another sense quite distinct, is the use of Vox Pops televisual documentary

techniques. These do not appear until the third section, dealing with oil in the 1974 present. Whilst the theatre version of *The Cheviot* draws on documentary material, it is reported by the actors. In the *TV Cheviot*, extensive use is made of collages of Vox Pops allowing local people from Aberdeen to relate their experiences directly to the television audience with the ring of authenticity.

The first sequence of some five minutes duration relates the process of people being displaced from their hometown by the steep rise in house prices. Newly-weds such as Agnes and Laurie McGeogh, in seeking to establish a family home find it 'virtually impossible to buy a house at all'. Sounding a distinct echo of the Clearances, others are forced 'to emigrate' (Iain and Pat Read) by the invasion of highly-paid oilmen mostly from America. These latter are represented initially in the Vox Pops collage by the nattily-dressed Casing Crew Supervisor, Al Butler, who initially praises the locals as 'the only honest people left in the world'. Subsequently, when the disillusioned Scots begin to ask questions about the benefits to them of off-shore oil-production, Butler's tone changes and, in veiled threat, he sneers, 'Do the UK people want to learn the job? Or do they want us to fly people in to do the job for them?'

Following a collage of shots featuring the logos on the rigs and equipment of Shell, BP, Esso and more multinationals, the second Vox Pops sequences, again almost five minutes in duration, presents local riggers who have first-hand experience of the working conditions. This material replaces 'Alex as *Aberdonian Rigger*'³⁵ in the playscript reporting similar content. Although the riggers are relatively well-paid when on the rig, they are not paid for their shore leave such that the remuneration overall is relatively poor. Working conditions are such, as one rigger relates from his personal experience, that a broken arm is bound up with a couple of American magazines and the man issued with a couple of pain-killers for the three-day wait until the next airlift to shore. In sum, 'we get all the scab jobs' and 'they treat us like animals'.

The use of an established televisual documentary technique of actual people relating directly to camera their personal experience serves to authenticate the narratives and political implications of *The Cheviot*. In the theatre, the live collective audience is invited to be persuaded by the directness of performer address underscored by the sentiment of a Gaelic song of Mary MacPherson, cementing the sense of 'communitas'. In the television adaptation, the Vox Pops technique (at that time not over-used to the point of today's viewer scepticism) lends conviction to the information. Against this more hard-headed appeal, a refrain of 'we'll fight once again/ for this country is the people's' affords an emotional charge.

The strategies of the televisual adaptation of *The Cheviot* may be unremarkable in themselves. Vox Pops are a standard of news-gathering and documentaries, and historical reconstruction is the mainstay of period drama. Reviewed critically, the historical inserts show signs of the hastiness of the adaptation. But it is the deployment of the various elements, the overall montage, rapidly inter-cutting the different modes which is distinctive. The attempt at a convincing realistic representation in the film inserts throws into interesting relief the cartoon approach to characterisation of the theatre performances and these modes of representation are thrown further into relief by the documentary treatment of contemporary Aberdonians. The swift historical recapitulation in mixed modes creates a sense of a

broad range of disaffected people, explains the cause of their disaffection and invites an immediate protest in response.

Political Contexts and 'TV Drama: The Case Against Naturalism'

Despite the failure of *les évènements* in Paris 1968 to initiate the European, and perhaps global, revolution which socialist activists at the time anticipated, the early 1970s witnessed a continued optimism in some quarters about the possibility for fundamental change in social organisation.³⁶ John McGrath's and 7:84 (Scotland)'s theatre project as outlined above must be set against this backdrop in order that readers who have grown up in the extreme individualism of the Thatcher and Reagan years might begin to understand it. If, with hindsight, a feel for grass roots revolution in Britain faded rather than exploded in 1974 at the fall of Edward Heath's Conservative government, popular resistance in the events of the 1972 'winter of discontent' encouraged an optimism amongst Leftist intellectuals that a greater change than the mere introduction of a Labour government was possible.

The question of the function of theatre, film and television in this context became a topic of hot debate in the early-mid 1970s with the legacy of Brecht being frequently invoked. Writing in 1977, McGrath noted that:

the thinking of Brecht is now absorbed into the mainstream of theatre-writing and directing but the concept of alienated television drama, such as the Cheviot film, has to be bitterly argued over at every level.... [I]n the absence of theoretical discussion, the *form* (McGrath's emphasis) of drama remains unquestioned.³⁷

A theoretical debate about cinema form was, however, in progress. Indeed, the publication in 1974 (the year of the *TV Cheviot*) of MacCabe's influential essay 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses'³⁸ marks an academic emphasis upon proposed changes in at least cinematic form. In summary, MacCabe's argument is that the very form of a 'classic realist text',³⁹ controlled by an unacknowledged metalanguage, resolves all its constituent, conflicting discourses and accordingly fails to place the reader in a position of contradiction. Whilst he acknowledges some progressive potential where the content of a realist text is at odds with 'dominant ideological discourse',⁴⁰ MacCabe concludes that, to invite investigation of contradiction on the part of 'the reader as producer....a revolutionary socialist ideology must be different in form as well as content'.⁴¹ In respect of drama on television, a key debate centred on the efficacy of Ken Loach's politically-committed, though formally naturalist, *Days of Hope*.⁴²

McGrath's abandonment in the late 1960s of the constraints of TV drama, as he saw them, to search for a new form of theatre performance, a theatre language different from the literary play of the bourgeois theatre, resonates with MacCabe's critique. McGrath observes that:

Naturalism contains everything within a closed system of relationships.... In terms of presenting a picture of society it can only reveal small clusters of subjective consciousnesses, rarely anything more.... [A]s a *form* (McGrath's emphasis), it

imposes a certain neutrality about life on the writer, the actor and the audience.⁴³

The historical moment offered choices for radical writers concerning form, venue and medium. As several commentators⁴⁴ have noted, various paths were taken by Leftist makers of political theatre in the early 1970s. DiCenzo distinguishes three key routes for left-wing practitioners at the time: 'the major subsidized theatres, the circuit of arts venues (including university theatre spaces) and the expanding area of community-based non-theatre venues'.⁴⁵ McGrath consciously chose the last with 7:84 whilst other playwrights such as Edgar, Brenton and Hare chose the first and community practitioners flourished elsewhere.

Between a Hollywood-dominated cinema and fragmented audiences for theatre, however, the medium of television appeared to some yet to offer a working environment in which interventions might be made. Television certainly offered audiences in numbers beyond the dreams of theatre playwrights, and the avowedly Marxist Trevor Griffiths chose television for this reason. As he remarked:

I simply cannot understand socialist playwrights who do not devote most of their time to television.... It's just thunderingly exciting to be able to talk to large numbers of people in the working class, and I can't understand why everybody doesn't want to do it.⁴⁶

Griffiths and McGrath, then, share the aim of addressing working class rather than bourgeois audiences though they disagree about where to find them and the medium of access. They also disagree about theatre language. In Griffiths' view, to deviate from television's dominant naturalist mode and experiment with form was counter-productive:

When you're trying to speak to large numbers of people who did not study English literature at university, because they were getting on with productive work, and you're introducing fairly unfamiliar, dense and complex arguments into the fabric of the play, it's just an overwhelming imposition to present those arguments in unfamiliar forms.⁴⁷

In markedly similar terms, McGrath also expresses the wish to address a working-class audience in a language familiar to it. But, as he puts it in his essay on 'Mediating Contemporary Reality':

if a theatre company wants to speak to the working class, it would do well to learn something of its language, and not assume that the language of bourgeois theatre of the twentieth century is all that is worthy of being expressed.⁴⁸

In these remarks not only was McGrath sniping at playwrights such as David Edgar who had taken the mainstream track, but expressing his disillusion on a practical level with the established conventions of TV naturalism:

Since naturalism evolved from a theatre of dialogue, the director is forced into photographing faces as talking and faces reacting. The director faced with a

torrent of words can only retreat into the neutrality of the two-and three-shot where the camera, caged from seizing on anything of significance, is emasculated and only allowed to gaze around the room following conversation like an attentive stranger.⁴⁹

To McGrath, the theatre heritage of drama on television coupled with institutionalised working practices inhibited the medium of television from developing other aspects of its potential. Indeed, in a long-standing friendship, McGrath had 'his only falling out with Raymond Williams over *Days of Hope*, when I said that, although it was telling an important story, because it was using naturalist techniques it wasn't making its point properly'.⁵⁰ In McGrath's view:

[t]he resources of television for putting an image on the screen - film with voice over, stills, animation, split-screen, reporter talking to camera, freely illustrated song - these simply do not come into the vocabulary of naturalistic drama.... When we come to more sophisticated devices for putting images together: montage, with soundtrack, creating a story-line from selected detail; jump-cuts with the urgency of the story linking the elements; moving from newsreader to film to stills - the language of a great deal of television - very few plays, even fewer series, dare speak it.⁵¹

The *Cheviot* was not initially written for television so in some respects it is inappropriate to judge it as a non-naturalistic TV drama. Indeed, as noted at the outset, McGrath consciously adopted Brechtian strategies only in the adaptation. The accident of a hastily-made television version yielded that juxtaposition of a wide range of modes which McGrath advocates in his critical writing. The strong historical narrative of Scottish history, and the overt sense that the audience is to be told a story, affords a through-line from which an 'interruptus' shift to the other televisual modes such as documentary Vox Pops and dramatised history can be made. These modal switches, adding to the sharp jumps between comic sketch, Gaelic ballad, didactic speech and community song already in the structure of the theatre-piece, resulted in a very bold piece of television. McGrath's nervousness that the audience might find it too challenging would seem unfounded from the audience response at the time. As noted, however, there are sufficient theatrical and televisual elements in the *TV Cheviot* to make it readable by an audience steeped in television's habitual naturalism.

The *TV Cheviot* could not, of course, recreate the impact of the live and local experience but, in so far as it serves as a document of the theatre piece, it does afford a glimpse of what was indisputably an extraordinary event in the history of political theatre praxis. The *TV Cheviot* points ultimately, however, towards the possibilities of a TV drama beyond its habitual naturalist form. Despite an announcement in a 1974 *Radio Times* by BBC's then Head of Plays that 'We are going to have lots more plays like *The Cheviot*',⁵² however, the promise has lamentably been honoured much more in the breach than the observance in the intervening thirty years. When asked in 2000 about the current possibilities for radical TV drama, McGrath observed that, 'neither of those two shows (*The Cheviot* or *Days of Hope*) would get on. That's for sure!'.⁵³ *The Cheviot*, then, remains

extraordinary both as localised political theatre praxis and as a rare example of Brechtian non-naturalistic television.

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Endnotes

¹ The play was given its first public airing at the 'What kind of Scotland?' conference in Edinburgh, April 1973, and first performed in Aberdeen at the Arts Centre, then throughout the seven crofting counties and many places in the south of Scotland (McGrath, 1975:5).

² Maria DiCenzo, *The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain, 1968-1990, the Case of 7:84 (Scotland)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 100.

³ See, for example, *The Guardian*, Thursday 24 January 2002, p. 22; *The Times*, Friday 25 January 2002, p. 2; McGrath's 'reputation was cemented by his best-known work, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*'.

⁴ Preface to John McGrath, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (Isle of Skye: West Highland Publishing Co. Ltd, 1975) (rev. ed., first published 1974), p. 2.

⁵ McGrath's view:

The theatre can never *cause* social change. It can articulate the pressure towards one, help people to celebrate their strengths and maybe build their self-confidence. It can be a public emblem of inner, and outer, events and occasionally a reminder, an elbow-jogger, a perspective-bringer. Above all it can be the way people find their voice (1981b: xxvii).

⁶ Maria DiCenzo, *The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain, 1968-1990, the Case of 7:84 (Scotland)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 90.

⁷ From 1960, McGrath worked for five years in the BBC, writing and directing a range of programmes, including *Z-Cars* which he initiated with Troy Kennedy Martin in 1962.

⁸ John McGrath cited in Lez Cooke, an unpublished interview with John McGrath, 27 April 2000, n.p.

⁹ For information on Mackenzie's initiation and work on the *TV Cheviot*, I am indebted to a telephone interview I conducted with John Mackenzie on 21 January 2002.

- ¹⁰ The postponed project emerged subsequently as a Peter MacDougal film *Just Another Saturday*.
- ¹¹ John McGrath cited in Lez Cooke, an unpublished interview with John McGrath, 27 April 2000, n.p.
- ¹² John McGrath cited in Lez Cooke, an unpublished interview with John McGrath, 27 April 2000, n.p.
- ¹³ John McGrath cited in Lez Cooke, an unpublished interview with John McGrath, 27 April 2000, n.p.
- ¹⁴ Preface to John McGrath, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (Isle of Skye: West Highland Publishing Co. Ltd, 1975) (rev. ed., first published 1974), p. 17.
- ¹⁵ Preface to John McGrath, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (Isle of Skye: West Highland Publishing Co. Ltd, 1975) (rev. ed., first published 1974), p. 23.
- ¹⁶ Maria DiCenzo, *The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain, 1968-1990, the Case of 7:84 (Scotland)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 39-50. Also, Grahame Holderness (ed) *The Politics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Basingstoke & Macmillan, 1992), pp. 7-10.
- ¹⁷ Grahame Holderness (ed) *The Politics of Theatre and Drama* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p. 7.
- ¹⁸ Preface to John McGrath, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (Isle of Skye: West Highland Publishing Co. Ltd, 1975) (rev. ed., first published 1974), p. 11.
- ¹⁹ Preface to John McGrath, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (Isle of Skye: West Highland Publishing Co. Ltd, 1975) (rev. ed., first published 1974), pp. 22-23.
- ²⁰ 'McGrath was deliberate in his choice to break out of the 'lament syndrome' of Gaelic culture: 'I resolved that in the play, for every defeat, we would also celebrate a victory' (DiCenzo, 1996: 172).
- ²¹ For a discussion of the relation between John McGrath as writer in a creative process which was in important respects collaborative, see DiCenzo, 1996: 92-94.
- ²² Alan Bold, *Modern Scottish Literature* (London, New York: Longman, 1983), p. 308.
- ²³ Alan Bold, *Modern Scottish Literature* (London, New York: Longman, 1983), p. 307.
- ²⁴ Alan Bold, *Modern Scottish Literature* (London, New York: Longman, 1983), pp. 307-8.
- ²⁵ John McGrath, *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre: Class and Form* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981a), pp. 18-35.

²⁶Alan Bold, *Modern Scottish Literature* (London, New York: Longman, 1983), p. 309.

²⁷John McGrath, *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre: Class and Form* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981a), p. 58.

²⁸Preface to John McGrath, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (Isle of Skye: West Highland Publishing Co. Ltd, 1975) (rev. ed., first published 1974), p. 27.

²⁹Troy Kennedy Martin observes that the audience 'sat patiently through the political bits, heads bowed as the actors denounced, years ahead of its time, the dangers inherent in globalisation' (*The Guardian*, 24 January 2002), p. 22. Mackenzie is evidently selective in his construction of the audience as positively engaged.

³⁰Preface to John McGrath, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (Isle of Skye: West Highland Publishing Co. Ltd, 1975) (rev. ed., first published 1974), p. 31.

³¹Preface to John McGrath, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (Isle of Skye: West Highland Publishing Co. Ltd, 1975) (rev. ed., first published 1974), p. 9.

³²Preface to John McGrath, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (Isle of Skye: West Highland Publishing Co. Ltd, 1975) (rev. ed., first published 1974), pp. 18-19.

³³Preface to John McGrath, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (Isle of Skye: West Highland Publishing Co. Ltd, 1975) (rev. ed., first published 1974), pp. 25-26.

³⁴ Kershaw (1992) demonstrates how, in spite of internationalist intentions, *The Cheviot* was mobilised in support of Scottish nationalism. In an attempt to appeal to local Highland audiences, an emphasis is placed on Scottish perspectives and histories which, particularly when coupled with powerful singing in Gaelic, was always likely to slide over into a sentimental, nationalist appeal in the reception of some members of the audience.

³⁵Preface to John McGrath, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (Isle of Skye: West Highland Publishing Co. Ltd, 1975) (rev. ed., first published 1974), p.29.

³⁶ McGrath witnessed *les évènements* first hand and Paris 1968 no doubt contributed to his sense of a need for a theatre of direct action (see Billington in *The Guardian*, 24 January 2002), p. 22.

³⁷John McGrath, 'TV Drama: the Case Against Naturalism', *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1977, p. 102.

³⁸Colin MacCabe, 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses', *Screen*, Summer 1974, vol 15. no. 2, p. 7.

³⁹Colin MacCabe, 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses', *Screen*, Summer 1974, vol 15. no. 2, p. 8ff.

⁴⁰Colin MacCabe, 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses', *Screen*, Summer 1974, vol 15. no. 2, p. 16.

⁴¹Colin MacCabe, 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses', *Screen*, Summer 1974, vol 15. no. 2, p. 25.

⁴²Tony Bennet et al (eds) *Popular Television and Film* (London: British Film Institute/Open University, 1981).

⁴³John McGrath, 'TV Drama: the Case Against Naturalism', *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1977, p. 102.

⁴⁴See Maria DiCenzo, *The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain, 1968-1990, the Case of 7:84 (Scotland)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); David Edgar, 'Ten Years of Political Theatre, 1968-78', *Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 8, no. 32, 1979, pp. 25-33; Grahame Holderness (ed) *The Politics of Theatre and Drama* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992); Catherine Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain since 1968* (London: Methuen, 1980).

⁴⁵Maria DiCenzo, *The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain, 1968-1990, the Case of 7:84 (Scotland)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 27.

⁴⁶David Edgar, 'Ten Years of Political Theatre, 1968-78', *Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 8, no. 32, 1979, pp. 25-33.

⁴⁷Mike Poole, John Wyver, *Powerplays: Trevor Griffiths in Television* (London: British Film Institute, 1984).

⁴⁸John McGrath, *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre: Class and Form* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981a), p. 59.

⁴⁹John McGrath, 'TV Drama: the Case Against Naturalism', *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1977, p. 100.

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⁵¹John McGrath, 'TV Drama: the Case Against Naturalism', *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1977, p. 102.

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