

Class, Gender and the Multinationals: A Year in the Life and Work of 7:84 England

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Since John McGrath's death in January 2002, tributes to and celebrations of his life and work have understandably focused on the significant role he and 7:84 Scotland played in transforming Scottish theatre. His relationship with Scottish audiences began with a production of his play *Random Happenings in the Hebrides* at the Edinburgh Lyceum in 1970, but his ground-breaking formation of 7:84 Scotland and its first landmark production, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* in 1973 secured his reputation. Its extensively researched exploration of Scottish history from the clearances to the discovery of North Sea oil, told through an inspirational combination of variety, agit-prop and ceilidh forms, redefined the Scottish theatrical landscape forever. Not only did it legitimise the use of a specifically Scottish subject matter and history, it did so in a form that reinvigorated the legacy of Scottish popular cultural traditions. Employing John Betts, Bill Paterson and Alex Norton from the highly successful *The Great Northern Welly Boot Show* (1972), that thrilled Glasgow and Edinburgh audiences the previous year, McGrath built on this show's sharp political satire, knockabout comedy, folksong and warm relationship with the audience to create a hard-hitting and emotive evening's entertainment about and for the Highland people. Illuminating audiences denied access to theatre due to their geographical location, the Highland tour of *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* also helped blow apart previous conceptions of touring policies by re-defining the map of Scottish venues to include village halls and community centres. David Anderson, co-founder of Wildcat Theatre Company, which emerged from 7:84 Scotland, recalls the impact of seeing *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* in a village hall in Skye:

All the mince in the West End, where the actors couldn't even be arsed acknowledging the presence of the audience was forgotten. Here was theatre that spoke to you about your life, the important things, the daft things, the things that give you joy and the things you can change. The company were startling in their energy, anarchic versatility and joyous commitment.¹

New works engaging with issues of Scottish history, politics and cultural identity immediately followed *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*. Opening in Golspie, Sutherland, *Boom* (1974), echoed its predecessor's concerns with the exploitation of the Highlands by landowners, cultural tourists, oil prospectors and multinational corporations. It also addressed the significant problem of internal migration from the Highlands to the 'bright lights, big city' and the urgent need to employ local resources to generate long-term financial security for the local population rather than short-term profit for multinationals. *The Game's a Bogey* (1974) and *Little Red Hen* (1975), two plays for urban audiences, explored the history of the Scottish Labour Movement and located the rising support for the

Scottish National Party (SNP) as a distraction from 'the kind of socialism popularised early in the century by the legendary Clydeside Marxist John McLean'.² Both implore audiences to learn lessons from the historical material presented and to retreat from the misplaced nationalism of the SNP and the kitsch tartanry exemplified by parodies of Harry Lauder and the Bay City Rollers. All three built on the style utilised in *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*, by incorporating scenes, political speeches, satire, song, documentary evidence, music-hall comic turns and direct address. Nonetheless, changes in subject matter, performance strategies and venues for the differing urban and Highland contexts, revealed McGrath's sensitivity to the needs of local audiences and the importance of immediacy.

These early performances cemented the presence of McGrath in Scotland and laid the foundations for a relationship fostered over several decades. Amidst this body of work, it is easy to forget that McGrath was also producing plays for the English arm of 7:84; as Randall Stevenson argues,

Scottish commentators and audiences are likely to forget this simply because his work was so important within Scotland - so influential on Scottish theatre; so clearly shaped by it, too.³

Frequently relegated to a footnote of theatre history, 7:84 England has suffered an interesting reversal of the cultural imperialism that often leaves Scottish theatre overshadowed by its English counterpart. Moreover, critics who acknowledge 7:84 England's existence usually add the proviso that it was less successful, artistically and politically, than its Scottish partner. It is relatively easy to speculate on the reasons for this assessment. For a start, the decision to formulate 7:84 Scotland and the company's ardent affiliation to Scottish audiences marked the final and triumphant stage in McGrath's journey, as Baz Kershaw charts this journey 'from the commercial mass-populism of the media, through the subsidised minority-elitism of mainstream theatres, to an ambitious stab at a (to begin with) self-financed popular localism'.⁴ 7:84 Scotland and *The Cheviot* consolidated McGrath's rejection of the metropolitan (London-centric) centre and captured the imagination of commentators fascinated by his political, cultural and localised activism. The company's strong socialist stance and the debates presented on Scottish independence and the consequences of North Sea oil succeeded in capturing the *zeitgeist* of early 1970s Scotland and heralded McGrath as an important voice on national issues. Theatrically, 7:84 Scotland could also draw on distinct popular cultural forms such as the ceilidh and variety to evoke shared cultural memories in Highland and urban contexts that were simply not available to more geographically diverse English audiences. Equally, the Scottishness and local credentials of performers and their engagement with rigorous research processes assured a sense of connection and identification with audiences which was much more difficult to achieve in England. Nonetheless, McGrath's output with 7:84 England was successful on many counts and what follows may be of interest to those who are predominantly familiar with his work in Scotland.

In particular, I wish to draw attention to the period directly following 7:84 Scotland's achievements in the early 1970s. Rather than turning his attentions solely to Scotland, McGrath returned to England in 1975 to contribute to a period he described as 'the peak of 7:84 activities in England',⁵ a view supported by Elizabeth MacLennan, who writes:

this was in my view the English company's most outstanding and consistent year. A high degree of commitment, musicality, skill, energy and flexibility characterised that particular company...⁶

Prior to 1973, 7:84 produced several new works by McGrath including *Trees in the Wind* (1971), *Out of Sight* (1972), *Underneath* (1972) and *Serjeant Musgrave Dances On* (1972), an adaptation of John Arden's political parable, *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* (1959). As 7:84 Scotland emerged, the English branch went dark for two years, a potentially fatal blow for a relative newcomer on the touring circuit; hence, it was vital that 7:84 England's return was successful. Events boded well when the Arts Council granted an annual subsidy to the company in March 1975, which enabled a group of like-minded people committed to the political impetus and artistic policy of 7:84 England, to be established. McGrath began a long-standing collaboration with the musical director Mark Brown and the musicians, Chas Ambler, Mike Barton and Mike O'Neill. Sandy Craig returned to administer the company and performers such as Harriet Walter, Colum Meaney, Hilton McRae and Chrissie Cotterill joined the company. All were integral to the company's success.

During this first year back with 7:84 England, McGrath embarked on a prolific workload. He updated *Fish in the Sea* (1972) for a 7:84 England tour directed by Pam Brighton; wrote and directed *Lay Off* and *Yobbo Nowt* for 7:84 England and returned to Scotland to write and direct *Little Red Hen*. Little wonder McGrath remembered 1975 as 'the year I did too much'.⁷ The plays for England provide the focus for this paper and, specifically, I seek to highlight the variety of form and subject matter McGrath employs in these plays and his responsiveness to the immediate socio-political context of their production and reception. In particular, it is interesting to note that whereas plays such as *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*, *The Game's a Bogey* and *Little Red Hen* employ historical material to comment on the contemporary climate, all the English plays are located in the present and in relation to specific political, industrial and ideological campaigns.

Fish in the Sea

Initially created with a working-class, Liverpool audience in mind, *Fish in the Sea* further developed the rock concert format McGrath experimented with in *Soft or a Girl?* (1971). Both were originally produced at the Liverpool Everyman theatre as part of a promotion of localised, popular theatre initiated by its Artistic Director, Alan Dossor, following the influence of Joan Littlewood and Peter Cheeseman. This genesis was built on during 7:84 England's well-received national tour when the company played several Liverpool dates including Titsfield Street Community Centre, Tate and Lyle Social Club, British American Tobacco Company, Everton Community Centre, Kirby Labour Club and the Fisher-Bendix factory. Primarily a

domestic drama, *Fish in the Sea* presents easily identifiable characters within a framework that utilises popular, social realist and Brechtian epic traditions. Reviewers variously described this eclectic approach as a political pantomime, soap opera, dramatised documentary and multi-layered chronicle. Emotive drama, romance, high comedy and direct address, join with a varied use of music to drive the narrative, illuminate character and offer political commentary. A *Western Mail* reviewer found this combination refreshing: 'At times it is extremely funny, but the play is much more than just good entertainment. It raises a mass of questions at both an intellectual and personal level'.⁸ Questions primarily centred on McGrath's interrogation of the distractions, contradictions and prejudices evident in working-class culture:

The main elements I wanted to set in some form of dialectical motion were - the need for militant organisation by the working class; the anarchistic, anti-organisational violence of the frustrated working-class individual in search of self-fulfilment here and now; the backwardness of some elements of working-class living: attitudes to women, to socialist theory, to sexual oppression, poetry, myth, etc.; the connections between this backwardness and Christianity; the shallow optimism of the demagogic left, self-appointed leaders of the working class; and the intimate realities of growing up and living in a working-class home on Merseyside.⁹

In the post-war period, sociologists argued that increasing individualism and commodity-consciousness was eroding collective working-class identification. Working class access to material wealth had significantly improved due to practically full employment, higher wages and the effects of the Welfare State. A change in fortune led to the *embourgeoisement* thesis, which proposed that rising affluence was negating class divisions as the working class adopted the culture, lifestyle and voting patterns of the middle classes. The solidarity exhibited by traditional close-knit working-class communities was arguably under threat from the self-contained, socially and geographically mobile, nuclear family. Similarly it was argued that the rationale behind Labour Movement involvement and trade union activism was being challenged by the growth of the 'privatised' worker, characterised by low job involvement, weakened family links and individualistic socio-political proclivities that stressed self-advancement through conspicuous consumption and social mobility.

We All Have Choices

Whilst acknowledging the threats posed by the factors outlined above, McGrath offered an alternative vision of the individual worker and nuclear family through the Maconochie family as they undertake domestic chores, forge new relationships, socialise, marry, fight, work and strike. The play emphasised the need to make sense of the past, to learn from mistakes and to pass on hope and strategies to the next generation. At the end of the play Mr Maconochie repeats Yorry's lines from the beginning of the play directly to the audience:

Not making any maps, for those who come after us: scattering bits and pieces of our skin and bones down the back-alleys of our minds. Leaving them to rot, for

the dogs to wrangle over.¹⁰

If nothing else, *Fish in the Sea* mapped some of the directions the working class could take in the years to come, from fully embracing the commodity-conscious socially mobile route to overthrowing the whole system of capitalist organisation. Above all, McGrath stressed the need for working class agency, solidarity and called for 'more maturity, and more determination from the working class, its allies, and the socialist movement in Britain.'¹¹

Taking inspiration from workers' occupations taking place across Britain during this 'politics of confrontation' era, but specifically in the Fisher Bendix Plant in Kirby, Liverpool, McGrath set his analysis of working-class struggle within a factory workforce, rejecting the thesis that factories necessarily produced 'privatised' workers. The patriarchal figure of Mr Maconochie represents the old-school proletarian worker tradition. For him conflict is central to the class divide; he views the media and police as hegemonic forces, is fiercely proud of his working-class status and believes in the possibility of securing a 'better world' through class struggle. Unfortunately, he remains frustrated by Britain's lack of socialist advancement and has little faith in the post-war generation, whom he perceives as apathetic and seduced by consumer culture. His fears are realised through his humourless son Derek. A beneficiary of post-war prosperity and the white-collar opportunities opening up to the working class, Derek disassociates himself from his family to pursue self-advancement in the 'affluent worker' tradition. He dismisses his father's working-class identification, brutally informing him that he wants more than 'what you're stuck with.'¹² His ideological opposition to his family's belief systems epitomised by his decision to join the police cadets, his rejection of trades unionism and his unquestioning acceptance of his deferential worker role: 'I just carry out orders. I don't question them. If I carry them out to the best of my ability, I get looked after, that's the way it is in this life.'¹³ Derek chooses to align himself to supporting and sustaining the status quo and, by implication, the subjugation of the working-class community he comes from. Mr Maconochie's daughter, Sandra, also provides a vehicle through which McGrath explored contradictions in the working class. She wants to commit to collectivism and support her father and fiancé in their work-based struggles, but everything in her socio-cultural landscape has taught her to desire a big wedding with all the trimmings. Yet, McGrath examined her viewpoint sympathetically and, in 'Sandra's Song', makes it clear that it is not Sandra, but the circumstances that contribute to her subject position that deserve critical treatment:

For since she was a girl in pigtails
They told her that this was her day:
Her magazines, her picture-shows, her horoscopes
All told her: they can't take this away...¹⁴

In many ways, *Fish in the Sea* introduced several of the concerns with female subjugation that became the central focus of *Yobbo Nowt*. For example, McGrath juxtaposes Mrs Maconochie's life with the rebellious independence of her three daughters who recoil from the domestic drudgery that defines their mother's existence. Mary summarises the lamentable position for many working-class women when she declares:

Men. Think all they've got to do is put their arm round you, breathe their stinking breath up your nose, whisper a few corny phrases, fumble for your tits, and bingo, you'll satisfy their every whim. Once that's all over, and you're lumbered with them for life, all you've got is cooking and washing and ironing - you're supposed to be a lovely, warm, kind person that everybody loves - mum.¹⁵

Locating the Fight

Alternatively, as seen with Derek, the male characters have choices to make. Andy, who strikes up a relationship with Mary, is an intense, angry and dangerously unstable character, who chooses to channel his considerable energies away from class politics into anarchic nihilism and macho posturing. His pent-up aggression is dissipated into acts of self-destruction: heavy drinking, picking fights and murderous activity as a paramilitary in the newly formed Ulster Defence Association. He actively seeks physical and emotional pain as a way of exorcising a disturbed inner life, theatrically illustrated by McGrath's use of expressionist animal masks for the bouncers who beat Andy up. A psychologically complex character, Andy chases risk and commits atrocities as a way of avoiding the culture of complacency he despises. Initially distanced from the other characters by his middle-class origins, private school education and Reverend father's retreat from the community he serves, Yorry embodies McGrath's concern with 'the political education and growing to socialist consciousness of the individual.'¹⁶ Eventually transferring Yorry's allegiance from romantic poetry to student militancy, McGrath parodies his character's enthusiastic rhetoric on the theoretical tracts of Marx, Luxembourg and Gramsci, although he does give him a degree of critical self-reflection:

The funny thing was, the more I said, the more powerful I became as a champion of the workers, the further I got away from them...At this time in my life the working class was no longer a lot of people I lived in the middle of and inescapably knew: it was an object of pure fantasy.¹⁷

While Yorry articulates the necessity for class activism, Mr Maconochie and Willy, Sandra's fiancé, strike at Robertson's factory, action that rapidly escalates into an occupation. Initially presented as a shoplifting 'scally' eating poached pheasant at church camp, Willy matures into a committed campaigner for workers' rights and his down to earth approach provides a perfect foil to Yorry's grand designs on revolution. At this point, 'McGrath manages to criticize abstract intellectual leftism and also to suggest how the intelligentsia can be of actual practical use in political struggle'.¹⁸ Yorry relinquishes his university career and uses his skills to provide a daily newsletter for the workers and community, printing speeches ignored by conventional press coverage and brief treatises by Gramsci, Marx and Engels. More importantly, he includes worker profiles detailing 'their lives, families, interests'¹⁹, signalling his growing appreciation of the relationship between lived experience and political action. It is this vision of solidarity and the triumph of a common cause over diverse perspectives that drive the play's message. For instance, McGrath undermines the homophobia that greets a letter of support and a donation to the strike fund from the Gay Liberation Front and the play closes as Yorry decides to

relinquish ownership of his dead father's house in order to make it available for Sandra, Willy and their baby. As Reinalt concludes:

the sense of extended family, of communal struggle, is what the strike action produces. It unites the two families - one could even say across class lines - and provides a way of living, if not tidy closure.²⁰

The Failure of the Labour Movement

Despite promoting trades union activism as the best way to fight exploitative practices within capitalist structures, *Fish in the Sea* offered a searing critique of the Labour Movement's willingness to capitulate in pursuit of reformist, rather than revolutionary, politics. This was material signalling McGrath's frustration with what Anthony Crosland and Ralph Dahrendorf were theorising as the 'institutionalisation of dissent': for example, the increasing use of non-confrontational conflict management and conciliation by trade unions and the Labour Party during industrial disputes. This shift consolidated in 1975 when the Employment Protection Act provided statutory recognition to the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service. In *Fish in the Sea*, a settlement reached between union leaders and bosses is useless because it coincides with a government ordered wage freeze. Moreover, the unions fail to negotiate long-term workers' rights, Maconochie and Willy face redundancy and operations are set to move to Germany, signalling the changing threat of capitalism heralded by multi-national corporations and a globalization of the market place. As Yorry asks at the end of the play: 'Capitalism was changing: the question was: were we going to change with it - fast enough, big enough and well enough organised to catch up with it?'²¹ It is to this shift, from the individual boss of the small business to the all-consuming power of multinational corporations such as ITT, IBM, GEC and General Motors, that McGrath turned for 7:84 England's next play: *Lay Off*.

Lay Off - A Didactic Cabaret

By the late 1960s the Left became increasingly concerned by the threat multi-national corporations posed to workers' rights, employment, national economies and the functioning of democracy. In particular, *Lay Off* interrogates the consequences for workers within monopolies generated by company take-overs, buy-outs and mergers that were increasingly prominent in the British economic landscape. As McGrath wrote, 'In two years, 1967 and 1968, 5000 British firms were taken over or eaten alive by the bigger fish',²² leading to rationalisation, a de-stabilised workforce and high rates of unemployment. Based on extensive research, *Lay Off* scrutinizes how several inter-connecting factors: scientific advancements; new technologies; Henry Ford's production line; increased mechanisation; changing labour relations; the failures of the TUC and the capitulation of governments to big business, contribute to the formation of large-scale corporations intent on generating increased profits from an exploited international workforce. In many ways, *Lay Off* echoes recent political commentary and activism around anti-globalisation and the all-pervasive influence of corporatism, documented in Naomi Klein's *No Logo*.²³ Certainly, twenty-seven years after *Lay Off* was written, McGrath's recognition of the

erosion of national borders as ultimate capitalist utopia appears alarmingly prophetic in the context of a world dominated more and more by American economic interest and the World Trade Organization:

Utopia for an international corporation would be world government. A world without frontiers. Absolute freedom of movement of people, goods, ideas, services and money to and from anywhere...A single global system of patents and trademarks, of buildings and safety codes, of food and drug regulations. A single, global currency. A single central bank.²⁴

Stylistically, *Lay Off* marked a radical departure from *Fish in the Sea's* emphasis on how politics is embedded and embodied in the daily lives and relationships of subtle and idiosyncratic characters; instead it consists of a Workers' Theatre Movement inspired agit-prop script divided between named 7:84 England members. The piece emphasised the imparting of information through topical, didactic cabaret style sketches, interspersed with songs, captions and information. Presented 'out front' through chatty direct address, *Lay Off's* form and performance strategies shield the overt 'message' from becoming too hectoring. For instance, it makes use of first-person narratives, diaristic accounts that personalise the broad depiction of class struggle as audiences learn of under-nourished children, police brutality and premature death caused by stress, exhaustion and working with toxic chemicals. Countering this emotive dimension is the use of documentary evidence such as quotations and statistics to substantiate the play's political analysis. It is worth quoting McGrath at length to illustrate the rationale behind this formal organisation:

...the rather complicated history of rationalization of industry with government support in the late 60s may not sound too promising for a joke-routine. But by the time, in 7:84 England's show *Lay Off*, a large Irish actor had finished explaining, as Arnold Weinstock, just how beneficial to the country, or at least to GEC, this process was, and we had brought the news to the audience of how many people had been laid off, and where, to allow GEC to amalgamate, take over, rationalize and prosper, not only were the audience highly entertained by the manic and comic manoeuvres of Weinstock, but also they had grasped how this process affected their lives - in terms of jobs, and the products they can buy - and something of how structural unemployment is created by capitalist solutions to working-class problems. So when the show zoomed in on one individual who had been laid off, feeling upset in a launderette, and mucking about in the garden, that individual was seen as part of a major social process of change with technological, industrial and political determinations, rather than just as a poor unfortunate layabout as he might be presented in a sentimental bourgeois drama. And the audience had grasped the essentials of the theoretical and historical ideas relevant to his - and possibly their - position.²⁵

Whilst it is impossible to qualify what individual audience members took away from this show, it is possible to explore some of the immediate issues and events McGrath attempted to document and challenge.

Multinationals and Political Pressure

During the mid-1970s, the British economy became more erratic, with inflation accelerating out of control, high unemployment and an unstable balance of payments. There was a widespread fear that power over export drives, the value of their tax contributions and their ability to influence inflation and deflation by moving profits from one country to another, were enabling multinationals not only to drive national and world economies, but to exert pressure on governments to act in their interests. As illustration, McGrath cites the profits multinationals were raising from North Sea oil and Harold Wilson's pledge to oppose this as part of his pre-election campaign in 1974: 'Our North Sea oil is vital to the nation, and we cannot see the profits from our oil, and the control over the production of it, going outside this country. We must nationalise it.'²⁶ However, McGrath also reveals Wilson's blatant capitulation to the multinationals when, in February 1975, despite setting up a new British National Oil Corporation, Wilson reneged on his promise to nationalise the industry and instead levied a 45 per cent petroleum revenue tax, which maintained a 20 per cent profit margin for oil companies.

Taking an international outlook, *Lay Off* provides a bitter attack on governments using their powers to quell countries that proved resistant to the exploitation of their people for capitalist profit. A lengthy exposition of the brutal events in Chile following Salvador Allende's election as President in 1970 after promising a 'transition to socialism' occurs and a recital of Allende's moving election speech is undermined by the revelation that, in the interests of American business and particularly that of ITT, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger put Allende under severe economic pressure. America withdrew aid, encouraged right-wing insurrection, employed the CIA to cause trouble and supported the 1973 military coup under General Pinochet, when Allende was murdered. *Lay Off* continues to shed light on the actions of ITT and the US government through direct address to the audience:

Documents came to light revealing ITT's remorseless campaign to force the U.S. government to intervene in Chile, including the offer of one million dollars to the CIA to cause a blood-bath.²⁷

By listing other incidents in the post-war period ranging from a CIA financed coup in Persia during 1951 to the use of the SAS to protect Shell Oil's interests in the Middle east during the 1960s, *Lay Off* stresses the pervasive nature of this political and economic engineering as a response to plans for re-nationalisation or an increased socialist agenda.

From Retreat to Activism

Building on the critique central to *Fish in the Sea*, McGrath repeated his concern with the lack of organised political activism and the potential of the post-war consumer boom, the expanding leisure industry and the increasing prevalence of popular culture to diminish workers desire to fight for an alternative to capitalism. Theatrically, the threat posed by consumer-consciousness was highlighted by giant soap powder boxes; songs about cars, white goods and jokes about lounging in a

'polyvinyl space-craft-shaped inflatable armchair, with your feet up on the brushed-nylon latex-foam filled beer-barrel-shaped pouf.'²⁸ As an antidote to this retreat into the myth of 'you've never had it so good', the play encourages workers to learn about the historical, economic, political and social context within which they work and calls for more solidarity and activism within an international socialist agenda. As exemplification, *Lay Off* concludes by documenting four strikes at Standard Telephones and Cables, a subsidiary of ITT, in East Kilbride between 1961 and February 1975. This struggle was employed as a model of how the working class can exploit the contradictions within the capitalist system, learn from mistakes and build on its capacity to organize and co-operate internationally to undermine multinationals. After a series of defeats by ITT, union activists in East Kilbride got wise and made unofficial links with ITT workers across Ireland, England, Scotland, Wales and Europe. When workers in East Kilbride came out on strike over a pay dispute in 1975 they were then able to call on other factories to 'black' parts made in other plants so that ITT's previous trick of moving production to another country was undermined and the workers could claim a hard-fought victory. The immediacy of this event, which only took place a few months before *Lay Off* started touring, was crucial to the form, content and success of the piece.

Lay Off toured throughout Lancashire, Merseyside, Wales, Cumbria, the Midlands and Scotland and the subject matter and style of the show, combined with the known political affiliations of 7:84 England, ensured that trades unionists actively sought performances for work-based organisations. Typical is a request from Roger Hands from Dudley, who writes:

On behalf of the Cannon Industries Shop Stewards Committees (A.U.E.W & TASS) I would like to enquire about the possibility of booking your theatre group for a union concert. I feel that the play 'Lay Off' is of particular relevance to us working in the G.E.C. frontline.²⁹

Critics and political activists alike recognised that *Lay Off* had something urgent to say about society and reviews suggest that audiences were hugely appreciative, whether in more obviously receptive environments, for instance occupied factories, or traditional venues such as the Sheffield Crucible, of the powerful combination of information, song and comic sketches. For example, the reviewer for *The Sunday Times* confirms: 'I was informed, stimulated and vastly entertained'³⁰ and *Time Out* reviewer Anne McFerran reports a performance at Ruskin College, Oxford, when the audience refused to leave and demanded an encore of songs from the show.³¹ The songs composed by Brown, with lyrics by McGrath, were a major feature of *Lay Off* and led to a successful LP release. 7:84 England's last show for 1975, *Yobbo Nowt*, while designed to 'be a contrast to *Lay Off*'³² built extensively on this element to create a musical comedy. Of this experimentation, McGrath wrote,

With Mark Brown, who composed the music, I set out to explore several ways of relating music to speech and story-telling: the sung narrative, straightforward character- and situation-songs, plus scenes in which the characters cut from speech to song, and scenes completely set to music.³³

Critics unanimously appreciated the play's musical component that, as Michael Billington recognised, 'acts not as an anodyne diversion but as a pungent melodic commentary'.³⁴ Overall, the form of *Yobbo Nowt* combined elements of the domestic comic drama and rock musical, central to *Fish in the Sea*, with direct address, popular cultural references and an extensive use of Brechtian-style narrators whose poetry and song comment on the action. In a shift from the collectivism of *Lay Off*, *Yobbo Nowt* centres on the personal narrative of Marie to examine the mutually reinforcing structures of patriarchy and capitalism. Although abandoning the polemical didacticism of *Lay Off*, political processes are central to *Yobbo Nowt* as it engages with the women's liberation movement and specific ideological campaigns fought by women to secure rights in the personal, social, work-based, institutional and legal arenas during the mid-1970s.

Yobbo Nowt

Yobbo Nowt toured during the year when the 1970 Equal Pay Act was supposed to be fully implemented, the Sex Discrimination Act was passed, the Equal Opportunities Commission was established and the TUC adopted the Working Women's Charter. Therefore, the play intersected with various projects to tackle discriminatory practices against women, including the Labour Movement's campaign to confront the male-bias of trade union discourse and activity. A change in attitude was desperately required if trades unions were to make an impact as women's role in the workplace flourished due to economic restructuring, the growth of the private sector and a declining male dominated industrial base. The decision to produce *Yobbo Nowt* also responded to pressure exerted within 7:84 for the company to address its own gender-bias in the issues it tackled and the representations it offered. As Harriet Walter, who performed in *Yobbo Nowt*, states, 'the socialist theatre in general was notoriously guilty of marginalizing women quite as much as the establishment theatre.'³⁵ Even McGrath confessed that one of the reasons for doing *Yobbo Nowt* was to address 'complaints that in *Lay-Off* the women hadn't had enough to do.'³⁶ This complaint was supported by such hot-beds of radicalism as the *Whitehaven News* which reported,

Chrissie Cotterill and Vari Sylvester had "bit" parts, when their talents could clearly have been used to greater advantage in more important roles. After all, it is supposed to be International Women's Year!³⁷

She's Just a 'Yobbo Nowt'

Yobbo Nowt deconstructs the traditional (male defined and constructed) representation and perception of women as on the margins of activity by placing them in the focal, central position of subject defined not solely by private (sexual and familial) identity, but also in relation to a public (economic) role. The play reverses the historical 'absence' of women, by foregrounding a female presence involved in a dialectical battle with patriarchy and capitalism. Alongside other plays of the period, such as Red Ladder's *Strike While the Iron is Hot* (1974), *Yobbo Nowt* took inspiration from Brecht's adaptation of Gorki's *The Mother*, the story of a working-

class woman's rise to political consciousness and militancy. *The Mother* was performed a number of times during the early 1970s; in 1972 Steve Gooch's adaptation was shown at the Half Moon Theatre in London and Belt and Braces Theatre Company toured with it in 1975. McGrath was 'interested in telling a similar story'³⁸ and in *Yobbo Nowt*, he takes *The Mother* as a structural and thematic model to trace a woman's journey into feminist and class-consciousness in England during the 1970s. Importantly, this model enabled McGrath to represent women as they were at this time: in a process of transformation. For many women the 1970s were a transitional phase, a coming to consciousness influenced by growing awareness of lived experience as both personal and political.

Act I explores women's inequality with men in the home and the state. With references to domestic violence, the sexual division of domestic labour, equal pay, single-parent families, payment for housework, sexual objectification, contraception, sexual fulfilment and societal pressure on women to define themselves in relation to men, the play was firmly located within the agenda of women's liberation. Specifically, McGrath presents a socialist feminist analysis of Marie's condition by stressing the interdependence of her class, low economic status and role of nurturer within the domestic arena. The initial sequence charts Marie's awakening to her subordinate position within the classic nuclear family and lack of power against Jack, her errant, sexually abusive and violent husband. She has internalised the lack of value afforded her role in society and appraises herself as 'lethargic, and dull, and pathetic',³⁹ a position juxtaposed with Jack, who is able to embark on sustained personal and professional development,

I'm nobody. Yobbo nowt. All the rest of them seem to be up to something.
Growing. Learning. Flirting. Mending fuses, making electricity hum. That's Jack -
he started off as a boilerman but he's doing night-classes and now he's going to
be an electrical fitter in a plastics factory.⁴⁰

Marie is in stasis, numbed by her mundane domestic existence that revolves around satisfying other's needs. The character talks directly to the audience about her desire for a job, independent status and Jack's refusal to appreciate the validity of her request, hence when Marie kicks him out, McGrath has firmly established this as a triumphant moment for his character. For the first time, Marie takes an active role in the decision-making process that determines her life and that of her two teenage children, Valerie and Stephen.

By focusing on Marie's transferral from private patriarchy to the patriarchal control of the state, McGrath identifies that Marie's subordinate position extends beyond the home environment. *Yobbo Nowt* emphasises Marie's lack of autonomy and economic dependence on men as defined by the Government. According to the social security officer, Jack owes Marie: 'He is your husband. In the eyes of the law he owes you a living...Until such time as you take up with another man - then he owes you a living.'⁴¹ This information also stresses the divisions inherent between women, as clearly it is far easier for a woman of independent means to leave her husband. In the Labour Exchange, Marie explains that she wants a job producing goods, a request that attempts to invert her previous role as consumer, but she is offered part-time, low-paid jobs tied to the domestic realm: cleaning, laundry or

school meal service. It is not only Marie's gender that stands against her, but also her age and working-class roots, illustrated by the reception she receives from Marks and Spencers:

...this woman looked at me like I'd been dragged in by the cat. 'We want girls, smart young girls, to set off on the first rung of our ladder,' she said. 'I don't think you'd fit in to our scheme of things.' 'No,' I said, 'I'm not the climbing type.'⁴²

After months on social security, Marie secures a job in an electronics factory, setting up the focus in Act II on women's subjugation within the workplace and as workers within capitalism. Marie's journey to an industrial-based, political consciousness begins when she learns about exploitative practices such as training rates and piecework, revelations that initiate discussions around women's apathy towards unions, which are non-compulsory and openly discouraged by the management. McGrath tackles the problematic sexual politics in union organisation and activity through George, the union representative. Instead of negotiating a settlement on a guaranteed wage, he concentrates on jokes and sexual innuendo, highlighting how the primacy of sexual oppression could circumvent legislation such as the Equal Pay Act. When Marie threatens strike action, his loyalties are revealed, 'Strike? But these parts are needed - you go on strike and there's men with families, out of work.'⁴³

Defined by a Male Framework?

A central tenet of 1970s feminism was for women to find a voice without the necessity of male intervention; hence McGrath's decision to write a pro-feminist text raises difficult issues, including accusations of appropriation and concern that women-centred discourse is dissipated when refracted through male agendas, structures and dialogue. Michelene Wandor argues that McGrath subordinates gender issues to a male-defined, traditional economic class struggle and that Marie discovers nothing about sexism, feminism or sexuality.⁴⁴ She also suggests women-centred experience is negated by the fact Marie has to enter the 'male' public sphere, before becoming politically motivated. Whilst McGrath does portray the battling individual woman, which ignores the collective power of the women's movement, and he fails to consider specific women-centred industrial issues such as flexible hours, workplace nurseries, maternity leave and sexual harassment, Wandor's assessment is harsh as it denies the socio-political issues McGrath does confront. In addition, accepting Wandor's claim that *Yobbo Nowt* is counter-productive because it deals with the political and public realm suggests a dangerous adherence to gender stereotyping that restricts women's experience to the private domain. The strength of *Yobbo Nowt* is that Marie's quest for knowledge drives the action forward in both private and public arenas and that she raises her political consciousness in the home and the workplace. As McGrath stated,

Marie...is shown in the oppressed, passive state of many women. She is then shown in the process of self-assertion, self-realisation, active participation in life and articulate, positive militancy.⁴⁵

Lest industrial militancy be seen as the ultimate goal in McGrath's narrative, the final scene significantly returns to the domestic sphere and Jack's attempt to resume his dominant position. To close the play, McGrath stresses Marie's autonomy and feminist consciousness when she rejects Jack, making it clear that, 'things have changed - attitudes, ways of looking at things.'⁴⁶ As proof of this process of development, McGrath depicts Stephen rejecting his father's chauvinistic stance and contributing to the home environment through domestic chores. Moreover, the impact of *Yobbo Nowt* must be understood in relation to the venues and audiences reached by 7:84 England. Alongside Arts Centres and traditional theatres, *Yobbo Nowt* toured trades union organisations, working-men's clubs and Miners' Institutes in places such as Caerphilly and Maerdy in Wales; venues associated with the working-class, male-centred industrial base that the subject matter critiques. Hence, *Yobbo Nowt* was a potential consciousness-raiser for women in the audience to confront their position within the home, workplace and to take advantage of new legislation; but also, for men to address their own gender advantage and the male bias and culture of the Labour Movement.

The Politics of Reception

If anything, the success of these productions can be judged, not only by positive reviews, but by the substantial number of letters written by audience members to demonstrate appreciation of the work, request further information or to offer practical assistance setting up dates and establishing contacts. All letters received a personal response inviting people to join a network of 'contacts/helpers around the country who will see that local publicity is done, that unions, trades councils, movement groups are contacted before we arrive, spread the word, etc'.⁴⁷ Formally and informally, 7:84 England established links with audiences, venues, promoters, Arts Associations and the Labour Movement during this hectic year. Typical is a letter from McGrath to Dave Godman of the Vauxhall Community project: 'I have been meaning to write to thank you for organising so many things for 7:84, and all the sweat you have put into it. We are all very grateful and hope the shows do a bit of the right thing around the Pool.'⁴⁸ For 1975 and the years that followed, this practical and personal engagement with audiences, members of community groups and socialist activists ensured that 7:84 England would always command large, appreciative audiences for its particular brand of topical, accessible, socially committed and politically informed popular entertainment. Even if McGrath's creative activism was increasingly located within Scotland after 1975, and this sustained period of critical appreciation and popular success proved hard to repeat, it is worth reinserting in to theatre history as a reminder of McGrath's work outside of Scotland.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Programme for *A Good Night Out: In Celebration of the Life and Work of John McGrath*, held at The Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh, 19 May 2002, p. 5.
- ² Randall Stevenson 'John McGrath', *The Independent*, 26 January 2002, p.6.
- ³ Randall Stevenson, 'Border Warranty: John McGrath and Scotland', *International Journal of Scottish Theatre*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Winter 2002), n.p.
- ⁴ Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention*, (London: Routledge, 1992), p.148.
- ⁵ John McGrath, in Nadine Holdsworth (ed) *Naked Thoughts That Roam About* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2002), p. 92.
- ⁶ Elizabeth McLennan, *The Moon Belongs to Everyone: Making Theatre with 7:84*, (London: Methuen, 1990), p.71.
- ⁷ John McGrath, in Nadine Holdsworth (ed) *Naked Thoughts That Roam About* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2002), p.86
- ⁸ Joanna Mack, 'Wit, Depth and Fun in Brilliant Play', *Western Mail*, 7 March 1975, n.p.
- ⁹ Author's preface to John McGrath, *Fish in the Sea* (London: Pluto Press, 1977), n.p.
- ¹⁰ Author's preface to John McGrath, *Fish in the Sea* (London: Pluto Press, 1977), pp.1 & 82.
- ¹¹ Author's preface to John McGrath, *Fish in the Sea* (London: Pluto Press, 1977), pp.1 & 82.
- ¹² Author's preface to John McGrath, *Fish in the Sea* (London: Pluto Press, 1977), p.12.
- ¹³ Author's preface to John McGrath, *Fish in the Sea* (London: Pluto Press, 1977), p.72.
- ¹⁴ Author's preface to John McGrath, *Fish in the Sea* (London: Pluto Press, 1977), p.50.
- ¹⁵ Author's preface to John McGrath, *Fish in the Sea* (London: Pluto Press, 1977), p.40.
- ¹⁶ Sandy Craig (ed) *Dreams and Deconstructions* (Ambergate: Amber Lane Press, 1980), p.45.
- ¹⁷ John McGrath, *Fish in the Sea* (London: Pluto Press, 1977), pp. 32-3.

- ¹⁸Janelle Reinalt, *After Brecht: British Epic Theater* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), p.192.
- ¹⁹John McGrath, *Fish in the Sea* (London: Pluto Press, 1977), p.57.
- ²⁰Janelle Reinalt, *After Brecht: British Epic Theater* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), p.193.
- ²¹John McGrath, *Fish in the Sea* (London: Pluto Press, 1977), p. 82.
- ²²John McGrath, *Lay Off* (unpublished manuscript, 1975), p. 40.
- ²³Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (London: Flamingo, 2000).
- ²⁴John McGrath, *Lay Off* (unpublished manuscript, 1975), p. 68.
- ²⁵John McGrath, *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), p. 96.
- ²⁶John McGrath, *Lay Off* (unpublished manuscript, 1975), p. 67.
- ²⁷John McGrath, *Lay Off* (unpublished manuscript, 1975), p. 62.
- ²⁸John McGrath, *Lay Off* (unpublished manuscript, 1975), p. 10.
- ²⁹Letter dated 28 June 1975, 7:84 England Archive, Cambridge University Library.
- ³⁰Beata Lipman, 'Cardiff', *The Sunday Times*, 15 June 1975, n.p.
- ³¹Anne McFerran, 'Monopoly Bop', *Time Out*, 11-17 July 1975, p. 9.
- ³²Author's preface to John McGrath, *Yobbo Nowt* (London: Pluto Press, 1978), n.p.
- ³³Author's preface to John McGrath, *Yobbo Nowt* (London: Pluto Press, 1978), n.p.
- ³⁴Michael Billington, 'Yobbo Nowt', *The Guardian*, 9 December 1975, n.p.
- ³⁵Harriet Walter, 'The Heroine, the Harpy and the Human Being', *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 9, no. 34, p. 111.
- ³⁶John McGrath, in Nadine Holdsworth (ed) *Naked Thoughts That Roam About* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2002), p. 91.
- ³⁷Anon., 'Talented and Provocative Theatre Group', *Whitehaven News*, 26 June 1975, n.p.
- ³⁸Author's preface to John McGrath, *Yobbo Nowt* (London: Pluto Press, 1978), n.p.
- ³⁹Author's preface to John McGrath, *Yobbo Nowt* (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p. 3.

⁴⁰Author's preface to John McGrath, *Yobbo Nowt* (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p. 2.

⁴¹Author's preface to John McGrath, *Yobbo Nowt* (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p. 18.

⁴²Author's preface to John McGrath, *Yobbo Nowt* (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p. 15.

⁴³Author's preface to John McGrath, *Yobbo Nowt* (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p. 57.

⁴⁴Michelene Wandor, *Carry On, Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics* (London: Routledge, 1986), p. 152.

⁴⁵John McGrath, 'Letters', *Time Out*, April 29-5, May 1977, p. 3.

⁴⁶John McGrath, *Yobbo Nowt* (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p. 61.

⁴⁷Letter dated 2 June 1975, 7:84 England Archive, Cambridge University Library.

⁴⁸Letter dated 8 July 1975, 7:84 England Archive, Cambridge University Library.