

**'Is it not possible to have a Poem made out of Theatre?' -
An assessment of the dramas and dramaturgy of Joan Ure**

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Joan Ure¹ posed the question of the title in a letter to director, Giles Gordon, after the critical failure of her play, *Punctuated Rhythms*, at the Falcon Theatre, Glasgow in 1962. For the theatre establishment of Scotland at the time, the answer was a resounding, 'No'. Ure was never a popular dramatist. Few of her plays were performed professionally, indeed many were never staged. Such productions as were mounted were undertaken by 'fringe', semi-professional groups, notably Glasgow University Arts Theatre Group and the shortlived Stage Company (Scotland)² in whose creation Ure played a major role.

Frequently in her plays, as well as in letters and articles, Ure laments the lack of opportunities for writers in the 1960s and early 70s in Scotland, the shortsightedness of the arts' establishment, the necessity to write small cast plays for economic reasons, the paucity of good directors, and the small (and short term) funds meted out by the Scottish Arts Council to dramatists. These issues recur in several of her *pièces d'occasion*, for example, *The Women who got a Government Grant*.³ Dayzee has spent her 'Government Grant' by travelling to London:

We're philistines up there, you see
That's why I've come,
I know it will be different here
Honestly,
If you didn't exist down here
to come to
We'd have to invent you.

This is a neat reversal of the prevalent notion that the southern English core culture dominates, or at least colonizes, the Scottish periphery. Ure posits the argument that the myth of English cultural imperialism is used as an excuse by Scots to mask their own cultural poverty.

The real invective, however, is directed against a character or rather a 'type' called 'Paisley Adams', at whose door the sickness of the Scottish theatre is laid:

He will do nothing that has not been guaranteed successful Somewhere Else.
That is not live theatre. Live theatre is what you can make out of something that
has never been tried before. It is an existential art, theatre. It must almost
certainly fail or it's not theatre.....I am sick of Paisley Adams and his
accountancy. I am sick of carefulness and don't let's try until we're sure we'll
succeed.

Joan Ure was certainly never 'careful' either in her personal life or in her dramatic writing.

The lack of opportunities for women on the contemporary Scottish stage was another favourite theme that pervaded her dramatic writing, as well as being the topic of various speeches and articles. *Make a Space for Me*, a short monologue to be delivered at the Scottish Society of Playwrights' Conference in Edinburgh in 1977, was designed to launch a discussion of women in Scottish theatre and rehearsed the issues already raised in *Take your old Rib back, then*, (1974) when

Malcolm ponders on the possibilities of an acting career for his wife, Fiona. They agree that since 1956, there have been few chances for female performers:

Fiona. The rise of the angry young man killed off the girls parts.

Malcolm. Ten girls there are for every good female role and some of the girls' parts are now played by boys: It has something to do with the shortage of dressing room space.⁴

These comments refer, of course, first to the kitchen-sink naturalism that became fashionable after the production at the Royal Court, London, of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in 1956, and, more locally, to the practice of cross-gender casting under the regime of Giles Havergal at the Citizens' Theatre, Glasgow, which began in 1969, a management which further annoyed Joan Ure by its lack of interest in plays by Scots (and women) dramatists. Paradoxically, considering the Citz's growing reputation for mounting self-referential, metatheatrical productions, it might not have been impossible for some of Ure's work to have found a place there.

While occasionally Ure's bitterness against the artistic establishment and the distributors of state funding diminishes her work, at its best, when delivered with her penetrating irony, her criticism hits the mark. This comment from *Scarlet Mood* (1964) is apposite:

A country makes the artists it deserves
as it makes governments.
Our artists shriek in paranoid discords
when they are not just hivering.
You hope they do not think they speak for you.⁵

Joan Ure did, however, have two important champions: first, Christopher Small, literary editor and theatre critic of the *Glasgow Herald*, who edited a collection of five of her plays in 1979⁶ and, as her literary executor, deposited her unpublished scripts, poems, letters, articles and occasional pieces in the Scottish Theatre Archive in the Special Collections Department of Glasgow University Library.⁷ Secondly, Stewart Conn, the Drama Producer for BBC Scotland, who did more than anyone at the time to create a canon of Scottish plays on the radio, was an enthusiastic supporter of her work.⁸

No writer is 'before her time', but Joan Ure in much of her work was at odds with her time. One sees now that her dramaturgy was experimental, breaking the bounds of both post-1956 'angry' naturalism and post-Brechtian political rhetoric. In an age 'hot for certainties' her ironic voice seemed frivolous and her metatheatricality, perverse and self-conscious. She commented herself on the fashion for 'pulpit theatre' in explaining why her play, *I see myself as this young girl* (1969), was initially rejected:

The producer said it had nice word rhythms, but it wasn't about anything and a radio play like any other play, of course, should be about something.⁹

The use 'of course' in this arch comment is typical of the dramatist who knew perfectly well that her work was 'about' a great many things: gender, Scotland, national identity and culture and the constant challenges of preserving creativity 'in a cold climate'. These subjects are not represented as discrete but are shown to be intricately linked and interdependent.

In returning to Joan Ure's own question, 'Is it not possible to have a poem made out of theatre?' I shall attempt to examine those interwoven strands and to explore how she exploits and celebrates the language of theatre while remaining a poet in the literary sense, how she experiments with poetry in the theatre and with the poetry of the theatre, linking lyricism with dance and movement in symbolic and surrealistic settings.

Gender Issues: 'Playing as Cast'

As a feminist, or to be more historically precise a 'women's liberationist', Ure believed that the roles allocated to men and women are not biologically, but socially and culturally, determined. In the specific context of Scottish culture, the failure to integrate the utilitarian, the rational and the 'factual', identified by her largely with the male gender, and the creative, the cthonic and the 'fictional', usually (but not always) in her work associated with the female, results in a sexual and cultural schism leading to dysfunctional gender relations and an ailing society. She expresses in dramatic terms the question posed in Sherry Ortner's article, 'Is Female to Nature as Male is to Culture?' and comes to a similar conclusion, 'that ultimately, both men and women must be equally involved in projects of creativity and transcendence'.¹⁰ In the Scotland of the 'sixties and 'seventies both women and creativity are seen to be marginalised. This 'separate spheres' ideology (Ure believed) resulted in part from the domination of Scottish culture by the Calvinist work ethic and Presbyterian sexual repression.

In the dramatic poem, *Scarlet Mood*, the Woman laments:

No true woman of Scotland
but she who suffers in love.
For a true man of her land
is separate, moral and hates all women
for good religious reasons.

The Man asks:

Is it the oatmeal I take at my breakfast
or the whisky on Saturday night, eh,
that gars me grue at the wimmen
as if the shape o' them would bite me?

He must go 'to the continang' for sexual fulfilment since he 'can't love a woman at hame'. The Woman in summing up this section of the play asks (and answers)

How do I love thee, my man, or my country?
I love thee against my will.

The implication is that for a woman at this time in Scotland, 'love', whether for her partner or her nation, is bought at the price of her own self-fulfilment. The juxtaposition of sexual love and patriotism interestingly links the challenges to both the personal and the political inherent in mid-twentieth century feminist ideology.

The societal determinants of gender confrontation constitute a pervasive theme in many of Ure's plays. In the fantastical early work *The Liarbird and the Interlard*,¹¹ the scripted theatrical roles are metaphors for the socially inscribed parts which men and women are assigned. The Liarbird, 'an

exotic creative female, is clad in radiant plumage' with 'head and hands brightly coloured'. She is discovered 'lacquering her claws'. The Interlard is 'a glittering male reptile, practical Lord of this world'. At the conclusion of the play he rails against those who would seek to trap them both in a false mythology – as seductively dangerous as their false costumes:

I mean you know how it is between you and me. The one of us needs the other. If I'm around you're there somewhere. Oh it's true these idealists think they're helping the cause of one or other of us, and what do they do, they drive one or other of us into hiding for a bit to make a new story. They're pathetic really.

Society constructs the opposition or gender identities: as in theatre, men and women must 'play as cast'.

If Ure represents men as well as women as the 'victims' of the mythologising of gender division in Scottish society that equates masculinity with 'facts' and femaleness with 'fictions', while promulgating the 'fiction' of essentialism for its own ends, she does not fail to address the problems of intra-gender role-playing within a female community, and, with both sympathy and irony, critiques the mythology of 'sisterhood'.

In *The Lecturer and the Lady*, (1972),¹² described by Alasdair Gray as a play in which 'Joan Ure is confronted by Betty Clark',¹³ public preconceptions of the supposedly irreconcilable stereotypes of the 'liberated woman' and the 'suburban lady' complete with hat and handbag, are challenged. The Lady (Susan) visits a distinguished woman Lecturer (Jessie) in her hotel bedroom the morning after the latter's talk to a group of 'ladies', of the Church Guild rather than of the radical feminist variety. The topic of their conversation is primarily the possibility of women's freedom of choice. After a frosty beginning, the dialogue between these two apparent opposites, accompanied by the sacramental wine (provided by the Lecturer) and the Fuller's Cake (provided by the Lady to signify that 'she is conventional'), evolves to elucidate the individuality of each woman. The initial reference to a spurious kind of sisterhood, ironically uttered by Jessie, as she 'throws on a few clothes' in front of her well-groomed visitor, 'Still, we're all girls together, aren't we?', is problematized as each of the characters comes to call the other by her given name. The socially constructed divide between the independent woman and the housewife crumbles. They become Jessie and Susan - rather than the Lecturer and the Lady. There is a demand for re-evaluation from the characters and from the audience. Susan returns to her marriage, stronger from having chosen it in favour of a viable alternative. Jessie achieves a personal, rather than an ideological, bonding with another woman, one which helps her understanding of the audiences to whom she has been 'preaching'. 'O Susan Fleming, née Cummings. I love you and your like. So help me'. Yet, there is no complacency in the conclusion. Both remain 'lost girls'.

Jessie.Wendy was a lost girl too, except Peter Pan was too quick in convincing her she was there to comfort lost boys.

Susan.And who's to comfort the lost boys when Wendy gives the job up?

Jessie.They'll remain uncomforted.

As Wendy does. As you do.

Of all the relationships possible between women, that between mother and daughter has been identified as potentially the closest and the most mutually destructive. As Adrienne Rich writes:

The materials are here [in the relationship between mother and daughter] for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement....¹⁴

Rich goes on to point out that every mother is also a daughter and 'may carry, as daughter, negative echoes of [her] own mother's martyrdom...'.¹⁵ Although Alasdair Gray in his radio tribute to Joan Ure, entitled *Vital Witness*,¹⁶ claimed that 'None of Betty's writing was autobiographical', in her treatment of the mother/daughter relationship she follows Hélène Cixous's directive, 'Woman must write herself. Woman must put herself into the text'. When she is writing as a mother, 'she writes in white ink'.¹⁷ In Joan Ure's treatment of the mother/daughter relationship she does 'write herself'. One effect of her having to nurse her mother and being forced to assume maternal duties at such an early age was that a 'mother' to Betty Clark/Joan Ure meant not only a 'life-giver' but a potential harbinger of death, a 'nurturer' that is in fact a dependant, a 'martyr' curbing her daughter, of whom she is intensely jealous, in the search for freedom and self-fulfilment, a confused image of negative and positive impulses.

Joan Ure's representations of mothers and daughters is simultaneously comic, poignant and ironic. Self-sacrificing mothers abound.

The mother of 'Lion' in *Seven Characters out of 'The Dream'* (1968) 'sees herself as an instrument. She very nearly doesn't see herself at all.' (p. 85). Such maternal self-effacement leads to an almost pathological desire to be 'needed', and a mother is most needed when the child is ill, unhappy or tired. Fiona, in *Take your old Rib back, then*, in talking of her mother, admits:

Mama is great for folks to relax with. The trouble is she's less encouraging when you're on the move. But lie down on the couch and look defeated, and apologise for ever having aspired and Mama is a joy to be with (p. 130).

This subconscious desire to have one's child suffer so that one may look after it (described in psychiatric terms as 'Munchausen's by proxy syndrome') is not restricted to mothers of daughters in Joan Ure's work. Martin in *Something in it for Ophelia* (1971) gives a most articulate expression of the condition:

What love means to mothers like mine is that you sit quite still in your bed while she turns down the clean sheets and sends for the doctor and serves you meals on a tray. Love to mothers like mine means you never do anything brave or anything generous or anything great because then she wouldn't know what to expect (p. 46).

The obverse side of self-sacrifice is envy, and Ure's mothers are generally represented as being jealous of their adult daughters whom they see as enjoying freedom of choice in a life-style denied to them. In *I see myself as this young Girl* (1968)¹⁸ Zeeri is left to look after her daughter's baby, while Dahlia trains as a social worker with a view to looking after other people's children. Zeeri envies Dahlia her career, but, caught in the cycle of long term 'caring', she ameliorates the situation by role-playing a young woman with a burning vocation impeded by an illegitimate child. The respectable grandmother copes by imagining herself an unmarried mother. Alasdair Gray in 'Portrait of a Playwright' sums up:

The play is about the need to soar above our responsibilities without abandoning them.¹⁹

The mother's envy is co-existent with the daughter's pity for what she sees as her mother's self-inflicted limitations. The envy/pity axis precludes a meaningful relationship. Fiona's assertion in *Take your old Rib back then*, 'I pity my mother and that is terrible. I love her and she can't love me for

envy' (p. 128), is echoed by the girl, Lion, in *Seven Characters out of 'The Dream'*, 'I love my mother.....because I pity her.' (p. 85)

Ure's mothers may compensate for their frustration, vulnerability and envy by viewing their daughters as projections of themselves, their creatures:

Fiona. She will only love me if she's made me. If she can be what she calls
"proud" of me. (p. 133)

or, by seeking to play every possible role that their daughters could wish for in their personal lives, and thereby inhibiting their opportunities for new relationships:

Joyce (in *A Play for Mac*):[I had] no father at all. So my mother was
always.....busy being my handmaiden and best friend
and everything else. It was a very tight uncomfortable
bond.²⁰

In *My Year for being rich and famous is over* (1972), the parents discuss their daughter:

Woman. I wish she approved of me.

Man. Your child should not 'approve' of you. Then who would she have to rebel
against? The long-suffering are not always kind.²¹

Amid the representation of problematic mothers and daughters who strive, but usually fail, to find a fruitful relationship, Ure examines the proposition that the 'best' mother may not always be the 'natural' i.e. biological, mother. In *Me Jane! You Elfie!*, Jane finds the mothering she needs in Elfrida, who nourishes her artistic talents:

Jane. You are like Juno, Elfrida.

Elfie. Her measurements were Enormous.

Jane. No, I mean, loving...mothering all the world. Caring
considering, protective, encouraging. Not barren ground
you

Elfie. (silent a bit) You're embarrassing me. I don't like to be
turned into an earth goddess or even a principle.²²

Jane is heterosexual: Elfrida is a lesbian. In this play, Ure explores the idea that some women are, consciously or unconsciously, attracted to members of their own sex because they feel that only in other women is their craving for emotional and physical comfort realised. This somewhat tentative enquiry echoes Adrienne Rich's view in her essay, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', in which she asks 'whether the search for love and tenderness in both sexes does not originally lead towards women.'²³

Joan Ure was writing, it must be remembered, in the 1960s and early '70s. Homosexuality was still illegal in the case of men until 1967, and lesbianism was largely unrecognised and unacknowledged. The birth of burgeoning lesbian feelings, interestingly linked in Ure's mind with a search for the ideal mother, is sensitively addressed in one of the poems in *Scarlet Mood*. It is spoken by the Woman, who admitting that she had 'not expected to be a "lover" of women', professes that she hungers,

as much as any man does
for the nourishing breast

of the good, the mother, the eternal female.
The kind, the responsive,
giver of healing and comfort,
cherisher and suckler of life.

Society, certainly Scottish presbyterian society, condemned, or rendered invisible, the existence of such hunger. The lesbian in 'this barren land' is laughed at, because feared, by men and 'straight' women know nothing of her, 'except in literature – where nothing is fact.' 'Fact' includes what Rich would call 'compulsory heterosexuality'.

The women *survivors* in Ure's plays are young, strong, pragmatic and capable of debunking the myths that both society and dramatic literature have spun around 'femaleness'. In effect, they choose their own roles, or recast the parts previously assigned to them by male canonical playwrights. In the two companion pieces, *Something in it for Ophelia* and *Something in it for Cordelia* (1971), each written to complement productions of *Hamlet* and *King Lear* at the Edinburgh International Festival in 1971, and each set in Waverley Station after the performances of the tragedies, Ure undertakes a re-vision of the secondary female roles which Shakespeare created. As Valentina Poggi has written:

Cordelia and Ophelia ... are twin pieces with an explicit feminist thrust, and also an emphasis on Scottish themes: two aspects closely related.²⁴

'Cordelia' transports her middle-aged father (he is represented as being only fifty-five) to the station on the handlebars of her bicycle before the maunderings of the Fool and Lear's partiality for applause entice him into participating in the tragic ending of the play. While her husband, Donald, is playing soldiers in the Tattoo on the Castle Esplanade, she persuades her father to escape with her to a Highland retreat. He is allowed a wheelchair (his 'throne') and a false crown. Their other worldly goods have been given away to charity. He is to sit in a summerhouse and sign autographs for the tourists in the season, while she keeps hens, grows vegetables and caters for families from the cities - a practical young woman's interpretation of Shakespeare's vision of the pair in prison taking upon themselves 'the mystery of things'.

As well as providing a feminist critique of *King Lear*, a play that, however poetically magnificent, is in its subject matter a reactionary paeon to patriarchy, Ure succeeds in problematizing the cognate 'Scotch Myths' of Tartanry at the Tattoo and the Brigadoonery of the Highland idyll. She further elaborated on these phenomena in a manuscript letter railing against 'the Scottish Zeitgeist, symbolized on whisky bottles, tea cosies for Americans and the Tattoo promenade yearly at the Festival, by the Scottish Soldier.' This 'Scottish Soldier' is for her 'an ambiguous image visually' being both 'male' in terms of his toughness, physical bravery and aggression, and female in his 'decorativeness', colourful kilt (skirt), velvet and lace and in the gentle, sentimental songs which he sings. In highlighting the 'female' in the male icon, she reifies the androgeny concealed in popular 'branding' of Scotland by a historically dubious image.

In *Something in it for Ophelia*, Ure dares to swing critical attention from Hamlet, one of Western theatre's most celebrated tragic heroes to the juvenile female lead, Ophelia. Hannah Macnair, a bank clerk from Falkirk, a practising member of the Church of Scotland, finds herself appalled at the behaviour of the characters in the production of *Hamlet* she has just witnessed, in which, 'everyone was showing off.... Jumping about and carrying on.' (p. 41) Martin Armstrong, her companion on the station platform, sums up her response with sad, yet comic, irony:

For Hamlet, she felt nothing. He was showing off. Polonius was killed by accident

and yet he was the girl's own father. Gertrude she never even mentioned---but for Ophelia, provision must be made. Ophelia must not 'let herself go' like thon!
(p. 50)

Hannah dismisses Ophelia as 'a simple, perhaps rather stupid girl, I suppose, poor thing'(p. 57) who is positively dangerous as a role model for all the young women of Scotland who cannot afford to behave with such histrionic self-indulgence. Both Valentina Poggi and Audrey Bain find that the play leans towards the endorsement of the views of Martin, silent reader of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, who has, as Poggi puts it, 'been Hamlet for years – Romantic, pale, intellectual and guilt-ridden'. She finds Hannah 'a type of "nice" middle-class Church of Scotland provincial girl... complacently sure of the truth and propriety of everything she says'.²⁵ Bain empathises with 'sensitive Martin – victimised by materialistic Hannah'.²⁶

While Ure does not withdraw her sympathy from Martin/Hamlet, she exposes him as a poseur, to whose self-regarding sensitivities and intellectual dilemmas, young women must be sacrificed, as Greek maidens to the Minotaur. Hannah devises a mantra composed of the names of all the men and boys whom she knows to protect her against the insidious seduction into servitude that she fears from the Prince of Denmark and all who might emulate his egotistical self-indulgence.

I had to remind myself of a few things. My own father's name, Maxwell Macnair, my brother's name, Rutherford Macnair. I kept saying all the names of the boys and men I knew, so that I wouldn't be turning my head and seeing everybody clapping and clapping because they were seeing themselves as Hamlet. (p. 42)

'Names' mean a proof of existence, that is strengthened by rehearsing them. 'It must have a name for it does exist,' cries the Woman in *Scarlet Mood*. Hannah is one of the few women in Ure's plays who embraces the masculine preoccupation with 'fact'. Her father had warned her 'against too much fiction'. (p. 41) The reversed polarities of 'fact' and 'fiction' in the Hannah and Martin serve only to endorse the barrenness of a society that cannot resolve such differences.

Joan Ure set these two short plays in a railway station,²⁷ a place of transit and a locus for change in direction. It is also a place that links the cultural bonanza of the Edinburgh Festival (and its Fringe) with the rest of Scotland. The premières of *Cordelia and Ophelia*, played by Arts Theatre Group actors, took place in a basement room in Edinburgh's George Square, a venue used by the student drama club at that time. Both the 'station' setting and the 'off-off Fringe' venue ironically position the plays, and Joan Ure's perception of her role as a woman playwright, as marginal, on the periphery of art and society in Scotland.

Another survivor, Fiona, in *Take your old Rib back, then*, expiates on the theme of the colonisation of Scotland, colonisation by Scotland and the colonisation of (and by) women and men.

Fiona.The white British man has been emotionally everywhere.
He is waiting for the sun to set on the last part of his empire.
I am the last part of his empire. And I the world is mine.
(p. 128)

Dramaturgical Technique

It might have been a consciousness of the need for economy of scale in the institutional conditions in which she was working that encouraged Joan Ure to write, for the most part, short 'plotless' one-

act plays, often involving only two characters, who appear, as Valentina Poggi put it 'to engage in a debate within a single consciousness'.²⁸ With the exception of her last play, *Condemned for Ecstasy* (1977), a community drama, there is no sense of the epic. Rather she chooses to work in miniature, engaging formally with the fantastic and the surreal, the aesthetic and the metaphysical. She pushes theatrical conventions to their limits while simultaneously celebrating the essence of theatricality. In experimenting with innovative forms she is constantly self-reflexive, interrogating her own artistic decisions, even as the consequences of such are being played out onstage. In contrast to other Scottish plays of the period, Ure's work is ahistorical, anti-naturalistic and lacking in action, in the Aristotelian sense.²⁹ Rather one finds echoes of European contemporaries, Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco. For example, she employs the playing space (in both senses of 'playing'), as well as stage furnishings and properties, as active participants in the drama, rather than as background or milieu as in the naturalistic mode.

Puck in *Seven Character out of 'The Dream'* describes 'television naturalism' as 'that low-key mode, like always being caught in carpet slippers with egg on your shirt front. That "being ourselves".' When we are really 'ourselves', he goes on, at our 'truest and best' we are not in metaphorical carpet slippers. 'What are we usually doing but parroting a pretty rotten part....? Things happen without reference to us. To make our part our part, speak it out loud.' (p. 65) Although several of Joan Ure's works explore the paradoxes of theatrical art, *Seven Characters* is the one in which the ambiguities of the interconnecting realities of 'the stage' and of 'life', of 'fiction' and 'fact', of the 'role' and the 'actor' are most fully investigated. The play, like its title, owes not a little to Pirandello. A group of seven actors who have performed together in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* meet for a reunion party which they have been invited to attend wearing the costumes of the characters which they played in the production. There are, therefore, several layers of 'performance': the 'real' actors who are playing actors, dressed for other roles, but for the most part playing themselves - or are they? In fact they glide in and out of their Shakespearean roles and their 'Urean' ones. The party in itself provides a frame for performance. 'Actors at a party', says Helena, the hostess, 'It's a sort of double take. A sort of slow motion jag.' She fears that the party is not a success, because 'everyone is being themselves all the time.' Puck responds:

What it is, that at a party - and to help it is in fancy dress, you are a character, but you have no play. Or if you feel you've been just lately cast in a play, everyone else is waiting for other cues than you can give now. (p. 72).

The participants may be seen as operating within a fact/fiction spectrum, from Puck who is firmly embedded in his Shakespearean role, to the girl, Lion, who almost always plays 'herself', and has the clearest conception of the distinction between stage 'reality' and everyday existence- 'It's fun to roar quite loudly when everyone knows it isn't a lion at all. I mean it's good because it's Just a Play'. (p. 79) But then, Lion is primarily a stagehand, in the context of the production when she swept the stage, in the context of the party where she prepares the food and in 'real' life where she supports her family in caring for a mentally handicapped brother. The girl Lion, the antithesis, as Valentina Poggi points out, to 'a "wild" animal', no King of the Jungle but a helper and server (often a stagehand), appears in many different guises in other dramas by Joan Ure. These roles demand in the playing a perkiness, an unmitigating jolliness than can become irritating. Alasdair Gray offers a perceptive reason for these pervasive Pollyannas to be found in Ure's early family life:

The young schoolgirl found she must give cheerful performances to critical audiences who disliked her if she did not act well enough to please them. Her own desires, her own character, had not much room.³⁰

Between the two extremes of Puck and Lion, of 'fiction' and 'fact', are Oberon who laments: 'It is never my play. I'm in,' and Helena who has ceased to be a professional actress because she had to play many parts 'simultaneously'. 'I didn't know who I was. All I did know was that I was.....in flux'. (p. 80) The 'actress' is made a metaphor for the 'woman' who has to assume a variety of roles at the behest of others. The actor playing Bottom is used as a device to punctuate the several movements of the piece, 'his turn being something like a Clown's between the acts in a circus.' (p. 75) The clown is an important figure in Ure's work, as he combines the performative, the grotesque and the anarchic.

Many of her characters or 'creatures' appear as (or change into) clowns, birds, puppets or semi-mythological symbolic creatures in stylised and exotic costumes. Their stage identity is frequently unstable, 'moving in and out of character as if changing shoes' as the Old Woman comments in *A Play for Mac*. In *The Hard Case* (1972), a monologue written in the wake of the Ibrox Stadium disaster in 1971, an actor, dressed as a clown on a stage described as 'halfway between a Courtroom and a Music-hall,' plays the defendant, a respectable middle-aged man who, overcome by feelings of guilt and responsibility for the football tragedy, changes into an arresting policeman and then into his own judge.

Characters comment to the audience and to each other on the way in which the play is developing or on how they have been made to speak. In *The Woman who got a Government Grant*, Billyboy remarks, 'Paisley, you and Loulou sound as if you've been collaborating on your dialogue.' When Mac asks Joyce her name in *A Play for Mac*, the Old Woman responds, 'You don't have to answer. He could have looked at the programme.' The element of 'play' or 'theatricality' is never out of mind. Likewise the playing space seldom represents a fixed location: more often it is to be seen simply as 'a stage', dressed with everyday, but incongruously juxtaposed objects, as in *You've Gotta be Somebody's Baby?* (1976)³¹ which is subtitled, 'A Satire for four actors and an acting area.' The set includes a Punch and Judy box, a jukebox, painted on a flat, mobiles and a windbreak. In *Coda Plus*,³² the set is 'a sort of wedding cake, heartshaped if possible'. On this surrealistic confection, the bride and groom play out their personal dilemmas.

While *Seven Characters* may be regarded as the synthesis of many of the ideas and dramaturgical devices found throughout Ure's work, she employs a variety of other techniques, innovative in their time, which have subsequently become accepted practice, particularly in postmodern performance pieces. One example of such multi-media expression is *Scarlet Mood* which incorporates poetic monologues by each of the four performers, a long narrative centrepiece in prose, a series of quick-fire comic routines by the quartet, movement, music, song and dance. Sheila Cameron set the lyrics to music and the dance in the original production by the Arts Theatre Group was choreographed and performed by Sylvia McBeth, a former member of Margaret Morris's Celtic Ballet Company. Dance is the vehicle for the dramatisation of the theme in *Punctuated Rhythms*, inspired by the techniques of improvised jazz, as the individual steps of the characters gradually come together. In *Coda Plus*, the opening stage direction reads, 'Movement is essential in a comedy which plays around with wordiness the way this one does'.

One possible reading of Ure's question, 'Is it not possible to have a poem made out of theatre?' is that verbal language is the dominant feature of her work and that staging, performing and movement are secondary considerations. This is not so. While the flexibility and texture of her choice of words, from the incisively ironic to the vividly imagistic, is vital to her dramas, her original and varied use of theatrical vocabulary is as masterly as her facility with the poetic. She combines a distinctive literary language with insouciant theatricality.

Rarely does Joan Ure write in Scots and when she does so it is with some irony. Her view what that, for her purposes, a Scottish accent was unnecessary in the acting of her characters because, as she put it in *A Play for Mac*, 'the Scottishness is in their psychology and should show up in performance.'

Yet her plays address issues that are still unresolved in Scotland, the complexity of personal relationships, national identity, the role of the artist in society. She sought for distance from passion. For example, in these lines from *Scarlet Mood*, she wanted:

To be good and clean and simple and serene.
Friendship is purer.
To see myself as stateless is easier, steadier
more ideal.

but she retained both her 'hate' and her 'love' for men, other women, her country, and her vocation as a poet and playwright.

Coda: These are some 'facts' and perhaps a few 'fictions' about Joan Ure. To friends, colleagues and performers in her plays, she was beautiful if painfully thin, of a charmingly benign appearance, exquisitely if eccentrically dressed, wholly self-absorbed and unfailingly manipulative. Ian Brown's poem, written when he heard of her death, 'At Antalya Remembering Joan' (1978) is apposite:

You in your disarming integrity, wicked ingenuousness,
Capacity to suffer pain and give ³³

University of Glasgow

APPENDIX A

LIST OF PRODUCTIONS

BBC RADIO PRODUCTIONS

Punctuated Rhythms, 1966
The Roes and Mr Speirs, 1968
I see myself as this young Girl, 1969
Something in it for Ophelia, 1971
My Year for being rich and famous is over, 1972
The Hard Case, 1972

STAGE PRODUCTIONS

Punctuated Rhythms, Falcon Theatre, Glasgow, 1962
Scarlet Mood, Glasgow University Arts Theatre, 1964
Suburban Commentaries, Glasgow University Arts Theatre, 1964
Nothing may come of it: a Revue, Glasgow University Arts Theatre, 1965
In this Space in Three by Three, Glasgow University Arts Theatre, 1966
I see myself as this young Girl, Close Theatre, Glasgow, 1968

Seven Characters out of 'The Dream', Glasgow University Arts Theatre, 1968
Something in it for Ophelia, Edinburgh International Festival Fringe, 1971: The Stage Company (Scotland) tour, 1972
Something in it for Cordelia, Edinburgh International Festival Fringe, 1971: Dundee Repertory Theatre, 1978
Her Year for being rich and famous is nearly over, The Stage Company (Scotland) tour, 1972
The Lecturer and the Lady, The Stage Company (Scotland) tour, 1972
The Hard Case, The Stage Company (Scotland) tour, 1972: Perth Theatre, 1978
Me for Hero, The Stage Company (Scotland) tour, 1972
Go West Wild Woman!, Castle Douglas Unity Players, 1974
A9 to Arcady, Pitlochry Festival Theatre, 1976
You've gotta be somebody's Baby, no?, Playwrights' Conference Newbattle, 1976: Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, 1976
Condemned for Ecstasy, Sirkus Productions, Irvine, 1977

APPENDIX B

LIST OF PLAYS IN THE SCOTTISH THEATRE ARCHIVE NOT MENTIONED IN THE TEXT

1. *The Demonstration or, stand down, sit up*, STA Jg Box 2/5.
2. *A Hatred like this.*, STA Jg Box 2/7.
3. *Hollow out a Rock and print*, STA Jg Box 2/8.
4. *I am a Queen. How about you?*, STA Jg Box 2/9.
5. *The Liarbird*, STA Jg Box 2/12.
6. *Money, Work and Beauty*, STA Jg Box 3/2.
7. *My Year for being rich and famous is over*, STA Jg Box 3/3.
8. *Once more with Feeling*, STA Jg Box 3/4.
9. *Quarrel and Answer*, STA Jg Box 3/3.
10. *A Transfusion of Venom*, STA Jg Box 3/11.

Endnotes

¹ 'Joan Ure' (1919-78) was the pseudonym of Elizabeth (Betty) Clark, née Carswell. She was the daughter of a Scottish engineering draughtsman and was brought up in Walesend, near Newcastle.

From the age of twelve, she was obliged to look after her father and siblings when her mother contracted tuberculosis and remained a permanent invalid. 'Betty' left school at sixteen and worked for two years as a typist prior to her marriage to John Clark, a Glasgow businessman. They had one daughter, Frances. Betty Clark contracted tuberculosis at the age of twenty-nine and it was while she was hospitalized that she began writing, later joining Edward Scoular's creative writing class at Langside College. She wrote poetry at first, but subsequently developed an interest in playwriting, supported by staff at the College of Drama, Glasgow, now part of the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama. She chose her pseudonym to distance her 'role' as writer from that of wife and mother.

² Glasgow University Arts Theatre Group flourished in the 1960s and 70s, and was dedicated to the production of new plays, primarily by Scottish dramatists. It performed principally in a theatre-cum-lecturehall in the Modern Languages Building on campus, and its membership included professional actors, and staff and students from the University and from the College of Drama. A reasonably full record of its activities is held in the Scottish Theatre Archive, Special Collections Department, Glasgow University Library. (STA). Stage Company (Scotland) was founded in 1972 by ex-Arts Theatre Group actors and directors, notably Robert Trotter and Helen Milne (Mitchell) who had taken part in several productions of Joan Ure's plays. A note on the company is in the Special Collections Department, MS Gen 1513/63.

³STA Jg Box 3/12.

⁴Joan Ure, *Five Short Plays* (ed) Christopher Small (Glasgow: Scottish Society of Playwrights, 1979), p.127.

⁵There are fragments of *Scarlet Mood*, but not a full script, in the STA. The author possesses the script of the part of the First Woman only.

⁶Joan Ure, *Five Short Plays* (ed) Christopher Small. (Glasgow: Scottish Society of Playwrights, 1979). The plays are *Something in it for Cordelia*, *Something in it for Ophelia*, *Seven Characters out of 'The Dream'*, *The Hard Man* and *Take your old Rib back, then*. Page references in the text are to this volume. Joan Ure was a founder member of the Scottish Society of Playwrights.

⁷Where these manuscripts are referred to in the text, the STA press mark is noted and, when known, the date of writing. A list of the productions of her plays is in Appendix A and a list of scripts in the STA, not specifically referred to in the text, forms Appendix B.

⁸A list of Joan Ure's broadcast drama is given in Appendix A.

⁹Ms letter, STA MS Gen 1513.

¹⁰Sherry Ortner, 'Is Female to Nature as Male is to Culture?', *Feminisms* (ed) Maggie Humm. (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 255.

¹¹STA Jg Box 2/13.

¹²STA Jg Box 2/11.

¹³Alasdair Gray, 'Portrait of a Playwright' in *Lean Tales* by James Kelman, Agnes Owens and Alasdair Gray. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985), p. 252.

¹⁴Adrienne Rich, 'Of Woman born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution', *Feminisms*, (ed) Maggie Humm. (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 274.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶*Vital Witness. A Radio Tribute to the Author and Playwright, Joan Ure (1919-1978)* Collated by Alasdair Gray: produced by Stewart Conn, BBC Radio, 25 February, 1979. Transcript – STA Jp Box 8/13. Material from the broadcast is included in Alasdair Gray's 'Portrait of a Playwright' in *Lean Tales* by James Kelman, Agnes Owens and Alasdair Gray. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985).

¹⁷Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Feminisms* (ed) Maggie Humm. (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p.196.

¹⁸STA Jg Box 2/10

¹⁹Alasdair Gray, 'Portrait of a Playwright' in *Lean Tales* by James Kelman, Agnes Owens and Alasdair Gray. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985), p. 252.

²⁰STA Jg Box 3/7.

²¹STA Jg Box 3/3.

²²STA Jg Box 3/1.

²³Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', *Feminisms* (ed) Maggie Humm. (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p.176.

²⁴Valentina Poggi, ' "How this Mother swells up towards my Heart." Joan Ure rewriting Shakespeare.' *A Theatre that Matters. Twentieth Century Scottish Drama and Theatre* (eds.) Valentina Poggi and Margaret Rose (Milan, Unicopli, 2000), p.78.

²⁵Ibid., p.83

²⁶Audrey Bain, 'Loose Canons: identifying Women's Tradition in Playwriting' in *Scottish Theatre since the Seventies* (eds.) Randall Stevenson and Gavin Wallace. (Edinburgh: EUP, 1996), p.143.

²⁷I am indebted to one of the anonymous referees of this article for this observation.

²⁸'How this Mother swells up towards my Heart', p. 74.

²⁹I refer here to naturalistic working-class drama of the 'sixties, such as Bill Bryden's *Willie Rough*, Hector MacMillan's, *The Sash* and Roddy MacMillan's *The Bevellers*; and also to historical plays, for example, Stewart Conn's *The Burning* and Donald Campbell's *The Jesuit*.

³⁰*Vital Witness. A Radio Tribute to the Author and Playwright, Joan Ure (1919-1978)* Collated by Alasdair Gray: produced by Stewart Conn, BBC Radio, 25 February, 1979. Transcript – STA Jp Box 8/13.

³¹STA Jg Box 3/13.

³²STA Jg Box 3/9.

³³Ian Brown has kindly agreed that I may quote this poem in full, since it is otherwise available only in (in his words) 'an obscure poetry journal of the eighties'.

At Antalya

Remembering Joan

(Joan Ure, playwright and poet, real name – Betty Clark, died in Scotland in February 1978)

Sitting at my office desk in Istanbul

Sifting mail I read you're dead

After in Antalya I walk

Through a worn Roman gate marked by a gable added

See a broken minaret on a temple once church once mosque

And by a Byzantine building on a cliff now Turkish

See a ruined Seljuk seminary and conserved Seljuk tomb

As through my own memory

I walk through a confusion of adapted contradictions

You in your disarming integrity, wicked ingenuousness,

Capacity to suffer pain and give

I see in the white earth-centring sea

Weightily frothing against dull red cliffs

And in the quiet cove

Full of craft

At Istanbul in my mail was your photo

Posing on a moped, wearing a long dress,

And I remembered your pseudonomic confusion and grace

No lecturer, no mere lady

Alive and no real pretence

No simple virtue ever