

Home International: the Compass of Scottish Theatre Criticism

Randall Stevenson

An *International Journal of Scottish Theatre*, eh? Might not there be something faintly contradictory, even self-congratulatory, in that title, presuming an international interest in something of concern mostly locally? Any small nation might ask itself questions of this kind. For Scottish theatre, the answers have been reassuring recently, as the first numbers of *IJOST* helped confirm. Articles were sometimes international in subject – including analyses of theatrical translations into Scots – and also in origin, with studies of Scottish theatre by a number of critics working outside the country. With a growing number of Centres of Scottish Studies in France, Canada, the USA, Germany, Russia, Romania, and elsewhere around the globe – no doubt all happily accessing *IJOST* on the web – criticism of Scottish literature is now conducted thoroughly internationally, with drama, alongside poetry and the novel, increasingly taking its due share of this attention. Further evidence of this appeared in *Scottish Theatre since the Seventies* (1996), its contributors including critics of German, Greek, Nigerian and Irish origin, alongside, more predictably, commentators from England and from Scotland itself. Significantly, too, the most recent substantial study of Scottish theatre was edited and published in Italy.¹

So if Scottish drama is now regularly admired, studied, criticised – as well as often performed – beyond Scotland as well as within it, and now has its own International Journal, what more could we ask? Perhaps that this expanding critical readership should be more ready to locate drama genuinely internationally: to *read* Scottish plays more regularly within the wider context of world drama; of movements in the European theatre; of international models and influences. Recent development in Scottish theatre itself demands no less. As I have argued elsewhere, dramatists towards the end of the century often moved away from the interests in specifically Scottish politics, history, language, or city life which had animated much theatre in the 1970s, in favour of themes of more general concern, with the debate between the generations in Liz Lochhead's *Perfect Days* (1998) – between values old and new, Scottish or cosmopolitan – emblematic of this change². Without resuming that whole case here, it is worth quoting again Sandy Neilson's accurate prediction, in 1981, of Scottish theatre's progress and changes of direction in the last decades of the century:

to begin with, [a] fairly introspective sort of drama – who are we? Who are the Scots? How do we actually relate, culturally speaking, to all those other people around us? Surely we have an identity and a voice of our own.

Then, eventually, that gets written out and we can then go on and expand the subjects to become truly international, yet with a distinctive Scottish voice.³

A more and more 'truly international' Scottish theatre naturally needs truly international criticism and perspectives.

Surely though – you might argue – it has not ever really lacked them. Rather than being introspective, or parochial, have not critics noted and discussed, for example, influences from Brecht or Piscator on John McGrath and other writers of the left? From Polish theatre, on Tom McGrath's *The Hard Man* (1977) and *Animal* (1980), or on *Communicado*, generally? From the Theatre of the

Absurd, on Stanley Eaveling? From Sean O'Casey, on numerous hard-bitten, naturalistic city dramas since the 1940s? And so on, with ample reference to other locally adopted developments and styles, too. Yet there does remain one area perhaps so obvious – or disturbing? – as to have been overlooked almost systematically in discussions of Scottish theatre's international context: England. Intent on consolidating the boundaries and identity of Scottish drama, critics have been understandably reluctant to recognise that it is English theatre, more than any other abroad, which offers the most illuminating parallels, contrasts and connections with what has passed over the Scottish stage in the last half century.

One of the most intriguing, if obvious, of these parallels is the relative poverty critics have identified in the dramatic writing of both countries, in the twentieth century, *until* its latter decades. Notoriously, G. Gregory Smith's 1919 study of Scottish literature considered drama as scarce as 'the owls and snakes of Iceland': at mid-century, George Munro continued to find only 'deserts and wild beasts' on Scotland's 'Theatre chart', and as late as the 1970s Christopher Small was still ready to turn to 'Snakes in the History of Iceland' as a metaphor for limitations in modern Scottish drama⁴. Views of this kind have already been revised, and may be ready for further reconsideration. In particular, Bill Findlay's recent *History of Scottish Theatre* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1998) showed that Scotland never really lacked a *theatrical* tradition, however occasionally beleaguered, in the twentieth century or earlier. Yet by comparison with the success of the nation's poetry, *play-writing* did seem distinctly attenuated for much of the century, until a new generation of Scottish dramatists appeared, often responding to a resurgent Scottish nationalism, in the late 1960s and 1970s. Representing what it calls work of 'the Seventies surge',⁵ Findlay's recent anthology, *Scots Plays of the Seventies* (2001), has further consolidated a general critical assumption – more or less in place since the BBC Radio series, *A Decade's Drama*, and Wodehouse Books' play collection, each produced in 1980 – that the 1970s saw at last a genuine revival in the fortunes of Scottish theatre.

Commentators including – among many others – Kenneth Tynan, Ronald Hayman, and John Russell Taylor ascribed a change in the fortunes of English theatre to the Royal Court Theatre in 1956, and specifically to John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, so often that their conclusions quickly became a kind of critical cliché: one sometimes even parodied in plays themselves. The theatre critic in David Mercer's *After Haggerty* (1970), for example, explains that 'the crucial development in our theatre in 1956 was, as has been repeated and analysed ad nauseam, Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*'⁶; mocking permutations of Osborne's title were still reappearing throughout Peter Nichol's *A Piece of my Mind* in 1987. The conviction that a vital, exciting drama scarcely existed in England before Osborne was never entirely plausible – given the work of playwrights of the stature of George Bernard Shaw, John Galsworthy, J.B. Priestley, T.S. Eliot, Noël Coward and Terence Rattigan – and it too has lately been much revised. Dominic Shellard's *British Theatre since the War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), for example, sensibly starts its second chapter in 1955, rather than 1956, to take in the new influences of Absurdism introduced through a first English production of *Waiting for Godot* in that year, and Shellard also has much to say about the impact of Brecht on English stages, also originating in 1956. Dan Rebellato's *1956 and All That* (London: Routledge, 1999) suggests a theatre before the 1950s more various and inventive – if not necessarily in the work of the playwrights named above – than has often been supposed, and a number of other origins for innovations too often attributed solely to Osborne and the Royal Court. Their views suggest further ways some of the changes at the time might be conceived, yet continue to accept the 1950s as a period in which the energies of the established English stage were decisively heightened and redirected. 'After 1956', Tom Stoppard once explained 'everybody of my generation who wanted to write wanted to write plays – after Osborne and the rest at the Court, and with Tynan on the *Observer* and Peter Hall about to take over the RSC'⁷. In making drama more exciting for a whole generation, Osborne and some of 'the rest at the Court' – principally Arnold Wesker and Shelagh Delaney – significantly added to shifts in mainstream theatre's class interests, and to a much more

dynamic engagement with ordinary life. Established English playwrights earlier in the century – those named above, in particular – too rarely moved their attention below characters of the middle class, or their setting out of affluent drawing-rooms. That ironing board which first audiences always recalled finding so startling on the set of *Look Back in Anger* was a decisive marker of a move away from such interests; from the ambience of the drawing-room to the harsher realities of the kitchen – a move summed up in the label of ‘kitchen-sink realism’ often applied at that time to the work of Osborne, Wesker, Delaney and other dramatists working under George Devine’s direction at the Royal Court theatre.

Evident to some extent in Scotland and in England, a relative quiescence in the drama in the earlier twentieth-century raises some intriguing questions for theatre critics and literary historians. Most obviously, why did the drama, *throughout* mainland Britain, do comparatively poorly until the later decades of the century, but then, in both Scotland and England, grow into probably the most exciting and rapidly-developing of the literary genres? A number of speculative answers suggest themselves. The decline of the single high culture which had prevailed until mid-century, the creation of a counter-culture in the late 1950s and 1960s, and the emergence of the diverse cultural fractions of later decades may have made the theatre a more and more essential arena of public debate, of interaction between increasingly diverse voices and interests, of social self-interrogation. Declining religion may likewise have required an alternate public space for the analysis of morality, relationship, responsibility, action and conscience. More concretely, the drama more than any other literary genre was the beneficiary of greatly enhanced Arts Council budgets introduced by the Labour government in the mid-1960s. Any new, stronger roles the theatre found for itself after the 1950s had a far better chance of being kept going by public funds than earlier in the century: by 1971, the chairman of the Arts Council of Great Britain was pointing in its *Annual Report*, with some natural satisfaction, to ‘a succession of waves of creative outburst . . . centred on the school of playwrights fostered by George Devine’⁸ and largely sustained with Arts Council money. Obviously, though, thorough answers about the whole progress, or lack of it, of theatre in Scotland and England, throughout the twentieth century, lie outwith the scope of this paper, which can more usefully concern itself with a narrower question raised by the same issues. If a new energy can be seen originating in English theatre in the mid-fifties, why is it usually assumed to have taken another decade and a half before a comparable revival occurred in Scotland?

One answer is that the usual assumption may be misleading: that Scottish drama had no great need to follow England’s 1950s revival, since it had undertaken several of the developments involved some considerable time earlier. Whereas the Royal Court revival in England in the 1950s centred at first on a ‘kitchen sink’ idiom re-emphasising the dramatic potential of realistic, lower middle- or working-class settings and forms of speech, Scottish drama at mid-century might well have seemed never to have moved *away* from such milieus and the speech-forms naturally accompanying them. J.M. Barrie had provided something more genteel and generally middle-class earlier in the century, and James Bridie continued to do so in the 30s and 40s. Yet from Joe Corrie’s *In Time o’ Strife* in 1928, through the Glasgow Unity plays of the 40s – Robert McLeish’s *The Gorbals Story* (1946) and Ena Lamont Stewart’s *Men Should Weep* (1947) in particular – Scottish theatre had thrived in the kind of shabby domestic setting, rarely more than a few feet from a kitchen sink, which English critics, most of whom had presumably missed the London transfer of McLeish’s play in 1948, claimed that Osborne and others were discovering for the stage in the later 1950s. Scottish theatre, moreover – in ways not always much valued by critics even in Scotland – *continued* to thrive on such material in the 1950s, often extending the idiom Unity had established in the previous decade. *All in Good Faith* (1954), for example, developed the kind of style and setting its author Roddy McMillan had experienced as an actor with Glasgow Unity in the 40s. George Munro likewise followed the success of *Gold in his Boots*, produced by Unity in 1947, with further examinations of the harsh realities of urban life – religious bigotry and family tensions in particular – in *Vineyard Street* (1949)

and *Gay Landscape* (1958). Kitchen-sink realism on the contemporary English stage might have seemed scrubbed and sanitised compared to Munro's grim vision, shaped partly by his work as a Glasgow journalist. Yet his plays obviously shared some of the characteristics of the English dramatic revival of the 1950s. This common vision was highlighted by the transfer of *Gay Landscape* to the Royal Court, in July 1958 – the week before the first play of Arnold Wesker's celebrated trilogy, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, opened its London run in that theatre.⁹

Some of the energies originally centred on the Royal Court had dissipated by the mid-1960s, to be replaced by what John Russell Taylor called a 'Second Wave' of new dramatists – mostly ones with strong political commitments, centred much more on Brecht than on Osborne – in England by the end of the decade. Their work can also be usefully related to the Scottish context, less in terms of the kind of parallels evident in the development of kitchen-sink drama than of patterns of influence flowing backwards and forwards between Scotland and England in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, or at work equally in both countries. Key factors in the development of that second wave of new English dramatists, and of the political theatre emerging around 1968, included the discovery that plays don't need to be performed in established, proscenium-arch theatres – even ones as sympathetic as the Royal Court – and that they may not need a conventional, theatre-based company for their successful staging. These were lessons available in a variety of contexts throughout Britain later in the 1960s: the Edinburgh Festival, or rather, principally, its Fringe, offered particularly significant – and particularly early – versions of them. The kind of radical energies the Fringe generated had also encouraged the establishment of the Traverse Theatre by 1963: as virtually the first small-scale studio space of its kind in post-war Britain, it was influential on the development of several similar small venues in England later in the 1960s – especially after the Traverse company's visit to London in 1966 – and eventually, through the different demands of these intimate spaces, on relations between stage, script and audience generally. Portable Theatre's seminal production of *Lay-By* at the Traverse, during the Edinburgh Festival of 1971, highlighted some of the effects on the numerous English political dramatists who collaborated in writing it – Howard Brenton, Trevor Griffiths, David Hare, Stephen Poliakoff, Brian Clark, Hugh Stoddart and Snoo Wilson. Equally influentially, the large numbers of semi-professional or small-scale companies attracted to the Fringe showed how successfully theatre could go on the road – working in small, ad hoc, or partly converted venues, or even the open air, getting close to audiences and using punchy, polemic material to grab their attention. Importantly, too, fringe outfits often departed from the hierarchical organisation conventional in larger companies or theatres, putting into practice within their own internal relations some of the political lessons which, in the radical mood of the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was often the main purpose of these new companies to communicate. These new forms of organisation, new theatrical messages, new staging possibilities influenced the work of a whole range of English companies working in the later 1960s and early 1970s – including 7:84, General Will, and Joint Stock, as well as Portable Theatre – and the work of a new generation, or 'wave', of English political dramatists who developed along with them, David Edgar, for example, as well as all those authors of *Lay-By*.

In Scotland, small venues continued to proliferate, such as the Pool, and the Studios at the Citizens and the Royal Lyceum, but fewer small, politicised companies appeared, and some of the lessons in new theatre they offered – ironically, having first been exported from the Fringe – had to be re-imported from England, largely through the work of 7:84 and John McGrath. Derived from the epic examples of Piscator and Brecht, from their recombination with native traditions by Joan Littlewood, and from McGrath's own work in the late 1960s and early 1970s at the Liverpool Everyman, the styles 7:84 brought north quickly adjusted with some established Scottish idioms, contributing crucial components to Scottish theatre in the 1970s. Performers in the *Great Northern Welly Boot Show* (1972) had already worked out how a strong Scottish tradition of music-hall could be adapted into a form of politicised theatre, preparing them for work with McGrath on *The Cheviot, the Stag*

and the Black, Black Oil in the following year. Scottish audiences, too – always more distanced than their English counterparts from the politics of Westminster, whether by nationalism or radical socialism – offered a more sympathetic context for the development of political theatre than was encountered by many of McGrath's English contemporaries: partly, of course, because the later were so steadily lured back into the very established theatres their early work had gained so much by quitting. In this and other ways, Scotland in the end probably proved more promising than England for the interests which had encouraged that second wave of dramatic revival south of the border.

That promise was much diminished by the political setbacks of 1979, but by that date a dramatic revival was firmly enough established in Scotland to survive those disappointments and to continue contributing to the cultural revolution which, in retrospect, appears to have been one of their principal results. Tracing that process, however – following Scottish theatre's progress down to the end of the century; continuing to compare it with contemporary developments in England – lies outwith the scope of this paper, intended only to suggest, at a couple of specific points in the century, how illuminating comparisons and contrasts of this kind can be. Even the brief discussion above raises a number of critical issues not much considered hitherto. Should Scotland's dramatic revival really be assigned firmly to the 1970s, or, possibly, like England's, earlier? How original was late-1950s, Royal Court drama, given what had been developed earlier in Scotland? Would it not be worth re-assessing the achievement of Scottish theatre in the 1950s, so often assumed a flat, disappointing decade? In particular, isn't it time to revalue the work of George Munro, closer than any playwright to the Sean O'Casey figure critics so regularly supposed the Scottish theatre to need? How far might Scotland's dramatic revival in the later twentieth century be seen as *fundamentally* international, owed in large measure to origins in the Edinburgh International Festival, or to the initiatives of visitors such as Jim Haynes in helping to found the Traverse Theatre? Some of these questions might interest future editions of the *International Journal of Scottish Theatre*. All of them suggest the limitations of confining literary history and criticism to a single country. English critics, of course, have always been guilty of doing so, and with impaired understanding of their own theatre – in its political phases particularly – as the regular result. Recent studies have done little to change this, despite the broad interests they sometimes claim. Dan Rebellato's subtitle, *The Making of Modern British Drama*, suggests a broad scope, but *1956 And All That* has almost nothing to say about Scotland. Slightly less minimal – with three pages out of 260 on Scotland – Shellard is nevertheless as patronising as he is ill-informed in suggesting in *British Theatre since the War* that 'a book deserves to be written about post-war Scottish theatre', as though none existed already.¹⁰ But Scottish critics have yet to do much better. What history refuses, culture must provide, and one of the responses to the disappointments of 1979 – in addition to the literary revival now evident in the last two decades – was the kind of critical determination, soon evident in Cairns Craig's *History of Scottish Literature* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1987-88), to stress the strength and autonomy of Scottish writing in all ages. This was a natural and essential response at the time, but now that a measure of political autonomy has been achieved, there is also a better possibility of looking beyond Scotland, as well as within it, for clarification of the nation's literary movements.

It is appropriate at any rate to raise this possibility in this edition of *IJOST*. Myriad-minded as ever, when Roger Savage wrote in *Scottish Theatre since the Seventies* about the issue of a National Theatre for Scotland, it was through a series of studious comparisons with similar developments throughout Europe, as well as with the brooding concrete influence of the National Theatre on the South Bank of the Thames. As his approach suggested, even when dealing with matters most central to a single nation's culture – perhaps especially then – an international perspective is illuminating and essential. Confident now of 'an identity and voice of our own' it is time to ask further how these relate and resonate with other people's, including – or especially – those nearest neighbours with whom, after all, we continue to share a good deal in terms of language, culture and history.

Scottish critics need to continue looking around them at every point of the compass. Due south is the one they have so far most neglected.

University of Edinburgh

Endnotes.

¹ Valentina Poggi and Margaret Rose (eds) *A Theatre that Matters: Twentieth-Century Scottish Drama and Theatre* (Milan: Unicopli, 2001).

² See Randall Stevenson, 'Perfect Days: Scottish Theatre at the Millennium' in Valentina Poggi and Margaret Rose (eds) *A Theatre that Matters: Twentieth-Century Scottish Drama and Theatre* (Milan: Unicopli, 2001), pp. 111-119.

³ Sandy Neilson, interviewed by Owen Dudley Edwards for BBC Television, 'Spectrum: A Theatre for Scotland', 8 March 1981. This section was cut from the broadcast programme, and is to be found in an unpublished typescript in the possession of the interviewer, pp. 25-26. I am grateful to Owen Dudley Edwards for having made this material available.

⁴ G. Gregory Smith, *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (London: Macmillan, 1919), p.105; George Munro, 'The Adventures of a Playwright', unpublished typescript, Mitchell Library, Glasgow, p.5; Christopher Small, 'Foreword' to David Hutchison, *The Modern Scottish Theatre* (Glasgow: Molendinar Press, 1977), p. iii.

⁵ Bill Findlay quotes this phrase from Tom McGrath in his Introduction to *Scots Plays of the Seventies: An Anthology* (Dalkeith: Scottish Cultural Press, 2001), p. ix

⁶ David Mercer, *After Haggerty* (London: Methuen, 1970) p. 20

⁷ Quoted in Simon Trussler, *New Theatre Voices of the 70s: Sixteen Interviews from Theatre Quarterly 1970-1980* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 58.

⁸ Arts Council of Great Britain, *Annual Report* (London: ACGB, 1971), p. 9.

⁹ The play was indifferently received by London reviewers, though several praised the strength of the acting. Performers included Iain Cuthbertson, Fulton Mackay, Edith Macarthur, John Grieve and Irene Sunter: it would be interesting to know if experience of the Royal Court in 1958 contributed in any way to their long, successful later careers on the Scottish stage.

¹⁰ Dominic Shellard, *British Theatre since the War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 177.