

A View of Scottish Theatre in Edinburgh During Festival 2001

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'Where my caravan has rested, Flowers I leave you on the grass.'¹

Duddingston Loch luxuriantly bathed in Turnerian fading sunset, brooding purple-watered, behind the Manse whose incumbent had skated on its icy surface two centuries since (watchfully followed by the brush of Raeburn) and whose garden tonight filled with human shadows riveted by the anguished power of King Edward I bringing unabortively to birth the Scottish nation. ...

The Monkey-God scampered across the Royal Botanic Gardens snickering with a fine Director's conceit oblivious of lowering clouds as he lured his cast and audience over space and time and endless female representations of spices in whose presence no Philistine could so much as think for an imagination's flicker of Thatcherite popular singers. ...

The dead boy strode, majestic and resolute, through the playground to the only swing still usable after the anger of his heartbroken friend had torn the rest asunder, rose to its challenge with the confidence he could never summon while alive, and sprang forward from its embrace as it paralleled the waiting earth. ...

Jim Hawkins stood alone and friendless, triumphantly and lip-tremblingly proclaiming himself the author of the disasters overwhelming his pirate captors and asking as his only favour that Long John Silver tell afterwards how he bore himself at the end, to which Silver behind him gave an ambiguous support, perhaps additionally poignant with their island but a drifting raft containing only their two selves. ...

Judas confidentially and confidently briefed his audience on the imminent Zealot uprising bound to result from the repressive Roman arrest of his beloved leader which he had orchestrated at what he was convinced was Jesus' wish, speaking his lines in tribute to his dead playwright. ...

Casanova, regardless of his conquest of immortality by making a literary exhibition of himself, fled and fled from one seduction to the next en route to the visual exhibition of himself conceived and realised by the schoolgirl who first seduced him. ...

The standup comedian, finally and irrevocably insane, repetitively screamed down the telephone to a far-distant Irish university that he had indeed accepted its appointment to its Chair of Comedy in the intervals of fantasising his lectures and ensuring seductions, while the representatives of his punitive landlord gathered their forces outside. ...

The doomed voiceless autistic child spoke her deeply internal monologue in firmly Scottish accents, usages, gestures, recording her father's adultery and mother's alcoholism like some unjudgmental God enabling us to write our own self-indictments, her translation from an original English background affirming the more strongly the universality of childhood isolation. ...

The rhythm of militarily dancing steps spoke their intended salvation of the Sioux in the 1980s now remembered as the final doom of their people and commemorated here in dramatised form to become a ghost of a ghost dance brought to momentary stage afterlife by Glasgow's return of a ghost shirt to the descendants of its long-despoiled owners. ...

The reunited school companions looked at one another as one abrasively telegraphed his intention to tell another that the third had fathered the second's last child, while the ghost?/memory?/survival? of the ousted fourth of their original band contemplated from a height. ...

The honorary graduand, luxuriating in the doctoral gown, glided back into memories of her infancy as child of a syphilitic prostitute whose subsequent fuel for her fiction set her firmly on course for her present honours. ...

The daughter of the insane Australian novelist for the first time refrained from rescuing him from his daily swim towards otherwise inevitable drowning in the wild waves outside their isolated Queensland harbour, as she pondered his latest delusion, that she was her own mother, and ran her hands through the sands. ...

The twelve were all Scottish theatre phenomena visible on the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2001. They were not necessarily the most successful of the season, and, if they were successes, not all had won their opening honours in this year or this city. None of them was in the Traverse, and if any Festival or Fringe venue can declare itself the citadel of Scottish theatre today, it must be the Traverse, rejoicing in its own Company's Play of the Year, Gregory Burke's *Gagarin Way*, flanked by Iain Heggie's exploration of geriatric dependence starring Edith Macarthur under a play-title which may have embarrassed even the Traverse.

Their own titles, respectively to the order of our opening tableaux, were:

The Wallace by Sydney Goodsir Smith (1915-75), directed by Charles Nowosielski for Theatre Alba MPR in Duddingston Kirk Manse Garden.

The Spice Trail directed and - insofar as it was - written by Toby Gough for Theatrum Botanicum in the Royal Botanic Garden.

Decky Does a Bronco by Douglas Maxwell, directed by Ben Harrison for Grid Iron Theatre at the Scotland Yard playground.

Treasure Island by Robert Louis Stevenson, adapted and performed by Ian Johnstone and Andy Cannon for Wee Stories Theatre for Children, in the Netherbow.

Judas by John Cargill Thompson, performed by George Dillon as one of a number of excerpts read and/or performed by different actors, directors and friends at the Memorial Service for the playwright, assembled by his daughter Nerissa and staged in Adam House, otherwise C venue, Chambers St., on 12 August 2001.

Casanova by David Greig, directed by Graham Eatough for Suspect Culture in the George Square Theatre.

The Chair, written and performed by Ian MacPherson at the Assembly Rooms.

Spoonface Steinberg by Lee Hall, directed by Mark Westbrook and performed by Kirstin McLean, produced independently by students of the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, and Nomad Arts, at (the Welsh) venue 13, Harry Younger Hall.

The Ghost Shirt, written by Paul Dinnen and Rob Evans who performed it with three others directed by Lu Kemp for Theatre by Design, in the Underbelly.

Our Bad Magnet by Douglas Maxwell, directed by Jim Twaddale for Borderline and Tron Theatre Companies in the Assembly Rooms.

A Good Crack at Life written and compiled from the works of Jessie Kesson by its performer, Jenny Lee, for Attic Theatre at the Netherbow.

Cracked written and performed by Skye Loneragan, directed by Zinnie Harris for the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama at Venue 13.

The Netherbow once again headed the list of venues offering Scottish material, in quality not always of the star-spangled luxuriance of American Festival Theatre offerings there in the 1980s, or some - though not all - of Sandy Neilson's Fifth Estate productions there and elsewhere. (Neilson performed at the Lyceum this year, in an EIF offering, Tom Murphy's *Too Late for Logic* directed by Patrick Mason with a Scottish cast in place of the original Irish). The Johnstone-Cannon *Treasure Island* could take its place among any of the Netherbow's Fringe First winners of olden time, with no apologies: theirs was as resourceful and recondite a two-handed adaptation as any the Fringe has carried for audiences of any age. One has to go back to the Lords of Misrule's *Gulliver's Travels* to find its equal. Amid stage or screen *Treasure Islands* it has little competition to fear. Its high textual fidelity might have denied it a *Scotsman* Fringe First by the rigorous ethical standards established under the great Arts editorship of Allen Wright, but its *élan*, artistry, and sheer *chutzpah* would have won applause from Stevenson himself. Not all of the original characters were under-taken by the duo: Dr Livesey was excised, smoothly enough, the parrot was managed by an umbrella-handle, and Ben Gunn by a floor-mop (shipwrecked sailors are governed by Crusoe union rules demanding salvage of as much gear as a raft can stand). Differentials were ably established, including a slight pansification of Squire Trelawney. Silver alone seemed slightly weakened by transfer to the stage, as he always is: either he is tilted too closely towards the lovable-rogue, exemplified by Wallace Beery and Robert Newton, or his homicidal propensities strangle affection in the audience's craw, as with Charlton Heston or Hywel Bennett (in Frank Dunlop's production when Festival Director) or the Wee Stories version under review. Stevenson's genius in tantalising the reader's loyalties doesn't survive the printed page: stage Silver can only be Jekyll *or* Hyde, so to say.

Otherwise, the Netherbow had a varied Scottish diet (whose most culinary manifestation was 'Supper with Robert Burns' at £12.50 per mouth). It revived a couple of John Cargill Thompson's Scottish plays: *An English Education* (on King James I of Scotland - not James VI and I, whose English education was of a much more postgraduate variety - thus commemorating one of Scotland's greatest poets as well as most remarkable kings), and *Port and Lemon* (as neat a Sherlock Holmes monologue as one could ask, showing Cargill Thompson's fairly forceful genius at work with unexpected subtlety and skill in conception of a drag part beyond the macho limits his persona liked to imply). A Conan Doyle theme makes it a Scottish play, as Stevensonian origin ensures for *Treasure Island*. Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, of course, is not a Scottish play: Cargill Thompson himself was witness to that, with his *Macbeth Speaks* making the case for the true Macbeth, albeit with a slight obsession on the survival of the Celtic Church in Macbeth's hands which rather collides with the real Macbeth's extreme devotion to the Pope, whom he visited. Robin Thomson did a nice extract from it at the Cargill Thomson memorial service where Dillon had reached such heights as Judas. John Sheddon, so lady like a performer of Holes-in-drag, proved a strong, if dying, Stevenson for the thespian obsequies. One remarkable revelation there was Cargill Thompson's speed in productivity: his Sheridan monologue was apparently written within two weeks of the first discussion of such a thing when the potential actor, Martin Heller, raised it with him. Alan Montieth had a similar experience with *A Wilderness of Monkeys*, Thompson's very valuable contribution to theatre history in presenting the self-narrated Charles Macklin. His use of Macklin as touring actor suggests a strong and sensible influence by Goldsmith's narrative of a strolling player.

Thompson was a very good, if vehemently opinionated, theatre historian. As a historian in general he was pulled in two directions. He undoubtedly had the delight of the good historian-as-detective to unmask the myth and restore the truth, but he tended to be very obstinate as to what the truth he had uncovered actually was. His daughter Nerissa told his memorial audience that when he told a version of something she knew to be inaccurate, he would insist that his version made the better story. In fine, he flourished by tension between his principles and his presentation. It also emerged that his father disowned him for a time because of his adoption of a profession in the theatre. Much of Thompson's personality as man and playwright varied between recreating the repressive father and reasserting his own rebellion against him. Sheddon in the Stevenson play's extract caught the tenderness of this when Stevenson is wishing he could put *Weir of Hermiston* before his late father for constructive advice, despite the portrait in the title-role being partly that of his father. Sheddon remarked privately that he doubted whether this was true to Stevensonian reality - RLS actually got on much better with his father than Freud-swilling biographers realised - but he felt it was quite true of the Thompson *père et fils*. To describe John Cargill Thompson as a loss to Scottish Dramaturgy is a little like saying that international shipping would feel the loss of the *Titanic*. He could be absurdly fundamentalist in resisting staging necessities for performance of his plays, regardless of the speed of their composition, but he knew more about warfare against historical cliché than almost any historian-dramatist since Shaw. And the plays will take revival all the better for more directorial freedom. *Judas* cries out for resurrection, not to say vindication.

Ironically, John Cargill Thompson's celebration - which his own hard-hitting pen and audience *rapport* ensured that it was - proved the only noteworthy Scottish item in what a season or so previous had been the Scottish International venue and before that the Famous Grouse House, at least guaranteeing a Scottish spirit. Now the C venue, liberated from its claustrophobic fastness in the Overseas Club on Princes Street, had spread itself to five sites, one here in Adam House, but none suggesting affinity with the Festival City. The same is true of most of the major venues, with the formidable exceptions of the Traverse and the Assembly Rooms. To define Scottish theatre can lead to nauseating competitions in chauvinism - one may think of the future martyrs of Dublin's Easter Rising of 1916, and of their posthumous votaries, denouncing the unIrishness of Yeats's Abbey Theatre. But theatre, like any other form of art or education (properly speaking, the same thing), needs to ask where it is on display or in performance, and for whom? It may very well then pay no further heed to such matters, but Manners no less than Munificence show cause to ponder them. Scottish theatre may mean a Scottish theme or Scottish actors or a Scottish company or a Scottish playwright or a Scottish director or a Scottish language, none of them necessarily exclusive, but any of them distinctively Scottish. We have won a new Parliament: yet there seems almost an instinctive counter-identification at work. The press has become much less Scottish, its crucial day-to-day decisions and much of its personnel now originating either in London or overseas. Newspapers may do well to consider refurbishing their threadbare Scottish credentials by encouragement of Scottish theatre very broadly defined. The definition of a non-native Scot also needs attention: some of Scotland's best friends in the theatre have been from furth of Scotland, such as the Traverse's Chris Parr whose priority on Scottish work has dominated and enriched that theatre since his angelic reign some twenty years ago. And some of those most contemptuous of Scottish identity are born in Scotland, as press personnel may remind us from their own ranks.

Theatre space is under continued attack in a city anything but immune from Thatcherite dry rot. Even the student Bedlam Theatre is now threatened, either by the Philistinism of its student masters or by the Phariseism of its academic overlords. Its obvious answer is to lay claim on local loyalties, but its own offerings in its venue were limited in 2001 to 'Tales of the Fat Cat': possibly amusing but hardly epoch-making. Most of its lessees seemed intent on adaptations, Dickens's *Two Cities*, Steinbeck's *Stones*, Carol Ann Duffy's poems, Agatha Christie's first thriller (this last by Cambridge ADC who could have learned a lot from a visit to *Wee Stories* at the Netherbow). *Illyria* at the

Bedlam delighted its visitors by adaptation of another kind: a drag *Importance of Being Earnest*. Nevertheless, if the Bedlam is in danger of student politician poison or academic statesman strangling, it should think of Scotching the snakes it cannot kill. The ghosts of Edinburgh University's drama studios in the Crown, Drummond Street, and the Roxburgh Halls around the corner from it loom vacant, dark and doomed, where once (respectively) in Fringetime Julius Caesar was Queen of Bythinia and the Polkatz *Macbeth* warned its audience away from its first three rows for fear of bespatterment by the blood. Both students and theatre, separately even more than jointly, were ideal vehicles for political protest: what better cause of their unity than their own survival, for students should realise that the university which closes their theatres will also close down the life of the mind in any original sense. If they do not keep their theatres open, they doom their own identities.

The George Square Theatre fought off an earlier academic (or pseudo-academic) attempt to close it down; and while Edinburgh University should remember the financial fate of the golden-egg-laying goose's killer, it has not (yet) priced the venue out of the reach of Fringe Thesps. Edinburgh University alumnus Jeremy James Taylor is no longer there with his National Youth Music Theatre (their much-adulated *Creation* was at St Mary's Episcopalian Cathedral, and for four nights only), and with his departure George Square is more peripheral to Festival Edinburgh. But the Theatre hosted eleven productions and the Square Gardens a twelfth, and all slots seemed well covered. Where doubts arose was not the Theatre landlords (although as a member of the institution my first duty as a critic is to testify against disorder in my own house), but that of their lessee, Suspect Culture, whose excellent production seemed to lack enough pitchmanship to fill a sufficiency of seats. David Greig is a most remarkable playwright of ideas, insights, wit and originality. Why must Suspect Culture bury his light under a suitably democratic, but essentially counterproductive, egalitarian billing: no doubt it reflects excellently on his own modesty and collegiality, but Greig has now a reputation sufficient to bring punters to his latest play for his name alone, and howbeit his original script has been workshopped, seminared, tasted, measured, adulterated, upstaged and directed, it is still the New Greig Play. *The Third Man* is known to the world as a Graham Greene film even if its most famous line (on Switzerland and the cuckoo clock) was thought up by the actor who speaks it, Orson Welles, and the movie denies the final reconciliation of man and woman with which Greene has originally ended it.

How far Greig's play justified its title, *Casanova*, is another and more debatable story. There was much more to the historical Casanova than a mere serial seducer, just as there was much less to Don Juan than Molière, Mozart, Byron and Shaw chose to let us imagine (though Shaw, for one, was ruthless enough about him when not at a playwright's work). But Greig's play was conceived in postmodernist gear or, more exactly, with time machine running full throttle, and his Casanova is a latter-day celebrity returning. If the names 'Connolly' and 'Connery' came to mind the connection was celebratory and C-related, rather than calumnious and censorious: and it was as the returned celeb in general rather than in any form of specialisation, showmanship in bonking being an alternative arena of achievement to that in Bonds or Boots. The play has a beautiful mathematical nature, granting an exhibition consisting of reproduction (in some unknown form) of a lifetime of seductions with dangers of new exhibits, possibly even involving exhibition staff. David Greig is far too young for any such memories to afflict him, but survivors of hospitality duties for the late Brendan Behan would recall comparable events, the seduction being into alcohol rather than adultery. The metaphor increased in intensity as the necessarily two-dimensional vision of an exhibition and its staff became thoroughly human as matters developed. It was genuinely funny about sex in ways almost unknown now that dirty jokes have become socially acceptable and theatrically inescapable. The play indeed reintegrates Festival Theatre and Exhibition territory, recently centrifugal: maybe Timothy Clifford might revive it to launch his next Festival Exhibition. It would certainly enhance his Scottish credentials better than tartan treads.

Grieg's place as modern Scottish dramatist has won just recognition, from Festival Director Brian McMaster on his throne to the meanest critic from the vilest scurrilous broadsheet (Murdoch-owned). 2001 saw no new play from Douglas Maxwell, yet this was the year he came into his own, with the masterpiece, *Decky Does a Bronco*, finishing the year-long tour begun at last year's Fringe which it took by storm when the storm would allow its performance, and his earlier *Our Bad Magnet* revised and revived at the Assembly Rooms which was billed in association with Borderline and Tron in its production. Maxwell's remarkable perception of generational ageing is reflected in much of his work, including *Helmet*, stage-read at the Traverse some years ago directed by John Retallack, who was *Scotsman* Fringe Firstwinner for his version of Byron's *Don Juan* over twenty years ago and happily returned in 2001 after long absence with his *Hannah and Hanna*, a deeply emotive two-hander on the friendship of a Kosovan refugee and a Margate girlfriend of a National Front man (written and directed by himself for Company of Angels, performed at the Gilded Balloon). *Magnet* and *Decky* both turn on adult recollections of a lost companion from an infant foursome, which led one prominent critic to conclude they really were the same play. By this logic, *Richard III* and *Macbeth* are the same play, but this particular critic would probably hold that they are. In any event, they aren't - neither are - and they concern two groups of very different persons.

The lost boy in *Magnet*, Giggles, is undervalued by his mates, and in fact proves to be a fairy-story teller of exceptional beauty and power, his creations somewhat in the spirit of Wilde's *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*. As teenagers the others plan to drop him from their unsuccessful band much as the Beatles dropped Pete Best. Giggles disappears, and the others never know whether he committed suicide, died or simply went away. But their own relations sour significantly as they mature into exploiter, innocent, and iconoclast. The play is clever, witty, abrasive, uncomfortable, and - in the fairy-story narration - hypnotically lyrical. It is a very different story from *Decky*, whose eponymous victim has daily arguments with a bosom friend, but is very much one of the gang, even if his failure to jump when the swing is at its right angle - to become, in fact, its hypotenuse - results in a brief spat of jeers and tears. Giggles dominates his friends by memory because one of them - the most obnoxious - swears by his literary genius to make money out of it while another - the most ethical - denies the genius, the originality, even the authorship: i.e. the figure making most claim on our intellectual respect is the most offensive to our aesthetics of criticism, and the champion of the creativity we love is the most offensive to our aesthetics of conduct.

Its flyer proclaims it 'a hilarious black comedy' when it is in fact a *tour de force* in ironic manipulation, but a very different work from the tragedy of a small child whose secret attempts to gain the knack of a childish game led to his sexual violation and murder. The memories that horror implants for life on the boys who knew Decky - including the remote fifth on the edge of their quartet whose father the audience may decide was the murderer - will be hideous, destructive, and isolating, as the play so well shows, a very different matter from profiteering from the lost boy's originality and casting lots as to its quality. Giggles, dead or alive, was a genius or the collector of genius unknown to anyone before or since which his genius could render even if it did not invent. Decky was a very ordinary little boy, slightly, though only slightly, less mature than his fellows. His vulnerability achieved a dimension of its own through performance by Belfast-reared David Ireland, whose Ulster voice so well conveyed the vulnerability and even fear behind the infant aggression. In the days after Festival 2001 Ardoyne was to show us many Deckys, horribly vulnerable to their manipulators whose exploitation amounts to child molestation. (In fact, in a frightful, unhilarious 'black comedy' sense the absurd critic may have a posthumous justification for taking *Magnet* and *Decky* for the same play).

We may allow ourselves to play with a happier link. Ben Harrison's cast, like Jim Twaddale's, required adults to play child parts. *Magnet* managed the transition from present to past with clothes and hair, but *Decky* was worked with two sets of actors, for the adult roles and the child

ones. The narrator through whose solitary eyes we see the recollection and its consequent reflection, must be undertaken by one actor, in this case a noble - indeed heroic - achievement by Keith Macpherson, proving himself a sensitive chorus and a tortured protagonist. And only one actor will be needed for Decky. But it was too much to ask small children to undertake a play of such complexity on such a subject, granted that Harrison had directed one child actor with extraordinary success in Anita Sullivan's *Clearance*. The normally botched illusion that actors really looked as though at different ages from their own worked, but worked following an infinite capacity for taking and (directorially) administering pains. And the first problem confronting the adult cast when it entered on its performance space for the first time was, how to do a bronco. Director and case in their youth had apparently swung, in most cases, but like the sweet chariot, they had swung low. And at that point an angel, disguised as a small boy (and, as Jerome J. Jerome remarked, one could think of no greater disguise for an angel to assume), appeared in an adjoining playground and on enquiry walked on to the set and instructed them all how to bronco. He took them through it, he literally showed them the ropes (chains, actually - easier for Decky's friend to destroy), and he perfected them. And then, before they even thought of asking his name for the credits, he disappeared. He never returned on any subsequent day, neither during performance in 2000, nor in 2001. Perhaps they should have credited him as 'Giggles'.

All of this was to play, at times inextricably, with comic material for tragic purposes. *Decky* in particular is a wonderful celebration of child language, games, fads, innocence, knowledge, a social history of young Scotland a quarter-century ago (the boys know their *Star Wars*), and much of it is very funny - a humour mostly sympathetic to the boys - as well as very informative. It brought out theatre in games children play, their rituals, codes, idolisings, their fanaticism for absolute commitment to a role and absolute devotion to a style, as well as their sudden, kaleidoscopic changes and their unpredictable losses of conviction. But Ian MacPherson in *The Chair* produced tragedy within the business of comedy, and insanity in an art-form most objective observers would be content to see as childish. He is, despite his name and long residence in Scotland, Irish-born, and a successful comedian and radio playwright. He could claim, indeed, to have made an art form of the confessional style of Irish comedy with its implications of clerical paedophilia long before the media had heard of such a thing. He was a successful radio playwright before comedy artistes knew that plays existed save as other companies' slots in their venue timetable. *The Chair* assumed a mad protagonist making ludicrous claims for his right to an Irish professorship, yet his frequent lightning-strikes of interpretation contain analyses of the art of comedy indispensable to any professor or any comedian. MacPherson obviously does know his own obligations to Flann O'Brien aka Myles na nCopaleen, a (much less) ka Brian O'Nolan, and is one of the few disciples whom the master might have acknowledged (MacPherson may not know that Finn MacCool and Mad Sweeney in *At Swim-Two-Birds* or 'Binchy and Bergin and Best' in the *Irish Times* column, were immortalised by a student whose master's thesis was too erudite for the then incumbent of the chair of Irish at University College Dublin, for which reason he failed it.)

MacPherson is highly original, as the number of his ungrateful imitators indicates, and the actual learning and depth of analysis in *The Chair* establish the credentials the play subverts. Its popularity is less certain. The Fringe programme, for once containing a valuable self-description for a show, announced 'The death of comedy has been predicted for many years. Ian MacPherson's one man tragedy speeds the process up'. Symbolically, it is perfect. The delusions of self-importance, the tattered male chauvinism, the imminence of economic Nemesis, the gold unmineable from beneath the dross, the self-destruction in the short-term returns for the fool's mask, the play that there might have been, even the recognition that should be available: greedily though comedy might have eaten away at the places and profits due to plays, the hardest-hearted of sworn enemies might shed a tear at so devastating a devised demise. Ian MacPherson's own face, seemingly owing more to Goya than to God, is its own changing masks, now leering, now lowering, and uniting its auspices.

If MacPherson's work is an intricate bonfire of comedy vanities ignited by their own self-exposure, another old sweat - what his venue would term a hardy perennial - appears to have dispensed with writing as an art-form. From time to time the Fringe does this, and the official Festival too - the Traverse production of Tom McGrath's *Animal* was at its weakest in its brief moments of speech, way back in old time when the Traverse secluded itself modestly in the West Bow and when Festival Director John Drummond who commissioned the production was synonymous with antiestablishmentarianism. Less happily, David Greig on an EIF assignment tried something of the same self-silencing a few years ago. Toby Gough in the *Botanics* seemed less to have eliminated language than to have bombed it back to the stone age. *The Spice Trail* crossed the centuries, but the clichés in which its mercifully few audible moments of dialogue were spoken have surely been doing their worst across several millennia. The protagonist could not act - we speak of the central figure of the plot, not of Toby Gough who can act his way out of anything - but here the Gough minimalism may have had an argument. The play followed a little Scots dishwasher discovering the history of spices, and his obvious mundane identity outwith not only his wild dream voyagings, but even the world of theatre itself was an oddly touching detail. As his audience presumably could not act either, its identification with the adventurer may have been the stronger. In some respects the idea itself was as ancient a folk-*motif* as the spice legends on which the Asian scenes drew: Irish and perhaps Highland viewers thought of the Gaelic *Aisling*, the patriotic dream-vision, as the sleeping boy finds his imagination peopled with dancers of (dare one say?) fifty-seven varieties.

The production's claims for Kipling origin seem to have been made in its creator's own sleep. The dishwasher Kim is described in the tolerably supportive crib sheet as 'a figure of the imaginative western mind navigating his way through events that have shaped our world': the magic pageantry was in fact closer to what Puck shows to Dan and Una in *Puck of Pook's Hill* (who in Kipling's pages were little better as actors than the Scots dishwasher). Kim is already eastern in his eponymous book: his Irish antecedent might account for the *Aisling*, but it is the west he has so much difficulty in understanding. *Just So Stories* do have the satiable curiosity of the Elephant's Child but the Scots dishwasher had no need to have his nose pulled by crocodiles, what with the beautiful Indian dancers perpetually presenting themselves before him under various epiphanies of national and nice spice. Toby Gough as the Monkey-God was Mowgli where not monkey. Solomon is in *Just So Stories* and appeared here as Bronx or Bowery boy, which was amusing until one listened to him: then he died for want of Damon Runyon. Similarly Kubla Khan xanadued bereft of meaning without the aid of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. If western imagination was to be shown in its eastern fantasies, some really representative plagiarism from the illustrious dead was needed. Alternatively, success required a return to the silent movies. Visually, it was gorgeous, exotic, erotic and sublime, if idiotic. It even reached high dignity when the boy met Gandhi on the salt marsh, after seeing through imperial princes, pirates and proconsuls. It mingles pageant and pantomime, myth and morality, kitsch and kaleidoscope. And it ultimately led to the restaurant serving 'the perfect curry', a dish seldom kind to the tongue. Perhaps ultimately Theatrum Botanicum will agree to allow the reconciliation of speech and spectacle, at the moment even more divided than east and west.

Yet Theatrum Botanicum can smirk in reply that they said it with flowers - and if their scripts continue at their present level, that is what they *will* say. They began some years ago in the *Botanics* with Gough's *Linnaeus* play-pageant-philosophy-procession, and by now the resident flowers appear so well trained that they probably turn their heads to the Director the moment he appears on the horizon. Innumerable plants could be seen gallantly remaining open during the wettest moments of performance. Gardens have never bloomed so theatrically since Alice left the Looking-Glass world. And in locations Edinburgh continues to assert its place in its own Festival, however little its visiting performers may know of it. Antithetical though their views on script and rehearsal may be, Ben Harrison and Toby Gough have consistently blazoned trail after trail in frontiers new to theatre. Harrison pioneered the full use of Greyfriars Kirk Yard for my own *Hare and Burke*. Gough

took over the top of Calton Hill for Bill Dunlop's Scots-language version of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* (Theatre in Wales had preceded him there a year or two earlier with its *Cymbeline*, but its ancient Britonic authenticity could not reach the spectacular primeval exoticism of Orestes bellowing his matricidal intentions across the entire city). Frantic Redhead of Los Angeles nowadays make the most (or, thinking of the intensely energetic lady herself makes the most) of Greyfriars Kirk Yard for her/their annual *Macbeth* (which fights its way through tattoo queues, crowns Macbeth in closes and murders Banquo in public privy entrances), to which she/they have now added the Dean riverside for Sherlock Holmes in Edinburgh (textually authentic yet with fully resourceful use of location: would that TV spin-offs could say as much under both heads). Other outdoors of yesteryear were not in use in 2001: the Hermitage was vacant, for all of its fitness for a fine *Tempest* some years ago. The ever-increasing Pleasances no longer feature the open space at back where once *Beowulf* was declaimed around a bonfire. But Old College quadrangle rejoiced in the brawl of *Coriolanus* in spaces once battle grounding University Rectorial fights recalled by Arthur Conan Doyle in *The Firm of Girdlestone*.

And in addition to sense of place, Fringe 2001 could show sense of relic, less for Edinburgh perhaps than for Glasgow whence Theatre by Design (mostly old Edinburgh student thespis) in *The Ghost Shirt* brought to multi-dimensional reality the historical reasons why Glasgow was asked - and agreed - to return the Amerindian sacred garment. *The Ghost Shirt* initially ran with great success at the Tron Theatre in Glasgow, but found it less easy to win influential friends in Edinburgh where sometimes reviews of the Glasgow showing were presumed to have pre-empted Edinburgh notice. The Underbelly in the former vaults of the former Chambers St Branch of the former Bank of Scotland was another former Harrison Gridiron discovery (this time for their own *Gargantua*), and by 2001 was largely taken over by Double Edge Drama (in reality Eton College at the Fringe, but very sensibly trading on their quality rather than on their name - which to a yah-saturated Scotland could prove double-edged indeed). Theatre by Design made the most of its vaulting resonance, with enough ghostliness to lend a tone, but not enough to saturate. Script was unified, episodic, intercutting from time to time and back and over without confusing, not a play but certainly an acculturation in logical argument. Its authors might differ little in age, but in fact crossed time themselves from two student generations.

Ulster-born Paul Dinnen was as fine a Donal Davoren in O'Casey's *Shadow of a Gunman* at the Bedlam of his day as any production would be proud to boast: if his Dublin had its Ultonian twinge, so have many Dublin voices and Davoren's regional antecedents have the possibilities open to the then disposed capital. He was also a Timon of Athens with dignity, nobility, and not quite enough hatred, under the inspired direction of Linford Cazenove, whose life in the theatre gave such rich promise, so cruelly cut short on the eve of his joining Ben Harrison as assistant director. Rob Evans, more or less from student drama of yesterday, had been the Banker in Bedlam's (sorry, Edinburgh University Theatre Company's) version of Lewis Carroll's *Hunting of the Snark* a Fringe or so back. None of these antecedents weighed down their versatility as they gave us the thrills and spills less in the wild west (which when it appeared at all was set in doomed Amerindian calm), than in the wild west show from whose British tour the ghost shirt found its way to Glasgow. Evans had graduated from Banker to Buffalo Bill; history, presumably, had seen the reverse process for the American west itself. Dinnen had perhaps inhibited himself by heavy narration, while from time to time hitting the sublime as only he can (*there is an actor Nature surely intended for the Abbey*).

The production itself excited a sufficiency of guilt and not, one hopes, merely a sanctimonious anti-Americanism; but the authors never quite settled whether to ride on Longfellow or to fight him, as though Bellerophon or Alexander - or, above all, Crazy Horse - should hesitate as to victory over the quadruped, or from it. Complaint about Longfellow's inauthenticity emasculates itself, since he was so obviously using Hiawatha as metaphor for Messiah and pre-white America for white America (his

reiteration of Amerindian dangers of mutual destruction in conflict was written as the United States lurched towards civil war). When the company worried less about sacrilege-guilt to Amerindians in quoting Longfellow they managed well. As *Theatrum Botanicum* was also indicating, paraphrase of the classics can be disastrous, but Theatre by Design fortunately moved rapidly to real text. They might have remembered Longfellow's other Amerindian poem, in which he described the eating of Custer's heart by Chief Rain-in-the-face after the battle of Little Big Horn as the inevitable result of a century of treaties broken by whites. That poem took more courage to publish than staging *The Ghost Shirt* before sympathetic, if insufficient, Scots and their visitors. Their multi-style, varied-pace, changing-target, Protean-formed totality could claim more versatility.

Theatre by Design might not be likely to make the parallel, but more nationalistic members of its indigenous audience enjoy self-identification with the Amerindians, and certainly Sydney Goodsir Smith's *The Wallace* played readily enough with ideas of subjection, assimilation, subordination, annihilation, drawing its lessons partly from the Nazi conquest of Europe. *The Ghost Shirt* was eloquent enough about Sitting Bull's surrender to showmanship with Buffalo Bill, and final spiritual resistance and murder. The same problems of diplomacy, destruction, war, peace, survival, kitsch and obliteration dominate *The Wallace*. Charles Nowosielski made the most of his open-air surroundings and darkening Duddingston lochscape and landscape in the Theatre Alba revival of a play commissioned for the EIF in 1960 and restaged by it 25 years later. Theatre Alba's version had to contend with the intervening popularity of *Braveheart* among Scots who could thole its Ancient British woad, impregnation of Isabella the consort and murderer of Edward II by Wallace, sado-masochistic thrashings around to avoid the hideous barbarities of Wallace's actual execution, &c &c (its Australian leading actress has recently and apparently innocently paid tribute to what it taught her of the history of Ireland where it was filmed and whose army it employed). Nowosielski kept us free from any such contamination, albeit his casting of a young lady of well-developed female pulchritude as the supposedly effeminate Edward II unsuspecting disbelief with the force of coal-delivery. *The Wallace* is a great play, but its male chauvinist weakness reflects its time of writing: Scotland was not only to be free, but heroic, heterosexual and homophobic, and with all due respect for text its Direction does not need to drive the folly farther. (It was extremely unlike the personal attitude of Goodsir Smith himself, a man of impeccable courtesy).

The contrast with Tom Fleming's production for the EIF in 1985 was instructive: neither Assembly Hall nor Manse garden gave the fullest latitude to the entirety of Scotland required for the first act, the second seemed to favour the garden for the concentrated scenes, the Assembly Hall had the advantage at the end where Scot after Scot deserts Edward I down so many different compass-points as though the country he had invented was falling to pieces around him and his Great Britain shrunk again to little England. Theatre Alba was evidently not prepared to give much of an alibi to Menteith, the betrayer of Wallace to the English. Roy Hanlon in 1985 had been a study in political moderation, driven to extreme collaborationist action by the violence of Wallace and to its polar opposite by that of Edward I. But James Sutherland's Menteith was much more self-interested than patriotic. The Red Comyn in 1985 was so clear a cut-throat that his future murder by Bruce in church might be taken as security precautions for the clergy, but Theatre Alba kept him obviously, if greedily, noble. The Manse garden seemed to inspire the play's initial tender exchanges to become what D.H. Lawrence in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* called 'Scotch and lewd': is it time, or the ghosts of innumerable General Assemblies, that make their memory from 1985 rather more delicate? Wallace himself did his best in both productions, but his work overall is more for a pageant than a play. Goodsir Smith was at his best in the English scenes: Oxford, after all, had made a Scottish nationalist of him. The summit of what was possible was scaled by Theatre Alba's Alan Ireby as Edward I; Leonard Maguire had done very well in 1985, articulate, credible, even touching towards the end. But for sheer concentrated force, and majesty, showing genuine, if strictly limited, kindness, only to break into homicidal fury at defiance, Ireby reigned alone. Goodsir Smith's vision of the historical

play of ideas, in the spirit of Shaw's *Saint Joan*, was vindicated here. Fleming's production gave the crucial strength to Bruce's declaration for Wallace, but the more nationalist production threw it to Edward. It was as though in addition to Shaw's Joan, Nowosielski had elicited Goodsir Smith's use of Eliot's Thomas Becket: Edward had become the various tempters, and all turned on Wallace's ability to withstand a frighteningly reasonable plea. Ireby managed his work admirably here; the audience was also tempted to want Wallace to agree. Hanlon's strength as Menteith in 1985 blunted that particular confrontation of the two opposed principals. Here it was naked.

Theatre Alba was also robbed of Edinburgh notices, the most important critic (from a box-office standpoint) declining to attend, not (this time) because of a previous performance in another city of this production, but because of a previous performance in this city of another production. The logic of this would seem to be that Shakespeare should be similarly taboo to Festival reviewing. On the other hand, he is not Scottish and therefore does not require a Scottish boycott. When pressed, the most important critic said 'Charles should move on'. The audiences of the Duddingston Loch *Wallace* showed no disposition to agree with her. Scottish theatre needs its celebrations and reinterpretations of its own classics: its revival after World War II was signalled by Tyrone Guthrie's revival of Lyndsay's *Thrie Estaites*, to obtain which he had to move *back* 400 years, and while *The Wallace* had been performed successfully within living memory - i.e. infants in arms at the time of its last appearance could act adult parts in it in 2001 - that still does not demand its permanent refrigeration. Charles Nowosielski has been unrivalled in fitting time-encumbered Scottish stagecraft for contemporary presentation - witness how he made James Bridie's *Holy Isle* and Robert Silver's *The Bruce* playable for EIF audiences, to the enhancement of the plays' reputations albeit to reproach from the author's son, and from the author, respectively. We need to know where we come from if we are to get ahead, on the stage as well as anywhere else, and the loss of the past is the loss of a dimension.

It is a dimension requiring study of fiction as well as drama, as shown by the continued vigor of adaptation of Scottish classics for the stage as well as screen. The recent epidemic of Stevensoniana, some of it meritorious, often included biographical content, and less extensively documented Scots writers are in even greater need of staging. Jenny Lee's *Jessie Kesson - A Good Crack at Life 1916-1994* at the Netherbow introduced the Inverness-born, Elgin-weaned, Aberdeen-reared worker and writer to neophytes and deepened the acquaintance of existing admirers. It cleverly treated the audience as a single individual, perhaps another honorary graduand at her Doctorate conferred at Aberdeen in 1987. The manner was perfect: she was the equal of the interlocutor, as her own new academic status proclaimed, but her friendliness was proof against any snub, and she no more looked down on us than (for all of her adverse experience) she expected us to despise her. Since she had won the honour for writings making no secret of her illegitimacy, institutionalisation, or hostile social treatment, her confidence and wry humour were altogether genuine. It was egalitarianism without AGITPROP: she was too polite to appear to be educating her listener.

Unfortunately, it moved into fictionalised reminiscence, instead of easing entrance to flashback with a linking 'I remember' or 'said she', all of which aids would then vanish as the story gathers momentum. Jessie Kesson had been a radio producer, but her whole case rested on being a natural person. The one-person show must be as a play in its own right, holding to the realities of the character in performance - unless the convention clearly assumes that the speaker reverts to youth in memories under our eyes. But this was too well-established in its honorary graduand retiring room (or *attiring* room) to assume fantasised rejuvenescence, as, say, Rosaleen Linehan did so successfully from what was intended for her death-bed title-roling *Mother of all the Behans* (*Scotsman* Festival Fringe First 1989). An 'as I said making a story of it afterwards' would have served, all the more when the protagonist in the novel or story being actually quoted from had been given a different name. Textual integrity needed a little more narrative border. With an average

performance and production such point would be otiose: but the average one-person show is merely a recitation with props. The strength of this is that it was no such thing, and the audience actually felt itself in conversation with the performer, without a word of comedian crowd-rape. The life and works were eloquently established, with mutual support, and, if anything the play deserved a little more of the conviction of its quality from the actor/author that she clearly had in Jessie Kesson. One might like her the better for her modesty, especially in the endless self-puffery omnipresent in the Fringe, but the evangelist deserved esteem no less than her Messiah.

Yet Jessie Kesson, alas, is also from the past, and the future beats at the door. Its more obvious beating is down the Canongate from the Netherbow, at the Harry Younger Hall, in the (Welsh) Venue 13, in Lochend Close, modernised and given its thrust stage by a Scots teacher at the Welsh College of Music and Drama, Iain Roxburgh, under whose venue management the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama have subcontracted for productions of their own or of individual students. One was written and performed by a Native Australian female student at RSAMD; another Scottified a remarkable London Jewish play, again with one performer. *Cracked*, Skye Loneragan's quietly horrifying portrait of a girl trapped on the Queensland coast with an eminent, but increasingly insane, writer father, established its local conventions readily enough, and the conquest of British cinema and TV screens by several recent Australian films of memorable landscape have domesticated the Fringe audience in the outback (perhaps outback does not extend to seacoast: but however accessible to motor-cars - which Father pushed off the cliff - its remoteness required some such term). Its universal implications were clear enough, but handled with sure economy: the slow realisation that the mad mind will lose its awareness of the girl's identity, and then harden in conviction that she is the mother whose death drove the father from reality, and then ..., the corresponding firming up of realisation that the daily rescue of the man swimming out towards non-navigable currents can cease, and thereby save the daughter ... Teenage Scotland, and the teenage world beyond it, are not trapped in Queensland hermitages, but the more general theme of ageing, vulnerable, threatening parents has all too universal an application. Skye Loneragan's can be a voice for all hemispheres, both as writer and as actor, baptising her audience into her own environment, making her perceptions into theirs. The girl's name was Hope.

Lee Hall's *Spoonface Steinberg* imagined the mind of an autistic child, medically doomed, performed in its Scottish version by Kathryn Hunter who sensibly made no effort to behave other than normally: she was solely the inward, never the outward, child, an Anne Frank trapped in an environment whence it can be released only by the cancer which will kill it. The child perception grappled with evidence of parental inadequacy, physical incapacity, divine conundrums, holocaust inheritance, and the simple Scots voice took no cover behind artifice, but straddled its actual adult and former child identities. Scots tone may be losing its religious affiliations today - *Decky* has fine barbed humour as its small boys decide that the difference between Catholics and Protestants is that Catholics have to go to church but Protestant mustn't - yet however it disintegrates, Scots voices fall naturally into the sound of religion. To a child in particular, God is a natural figure; to whatever grasp of reality an autistic child may have, God has a meaning conceivably stronger than adult sophisticates can now understand. And while the play is not Scots in its origin, the great services of Scottish Jews to the arts make it transposition all the more natural. The challenge of Scottification is one frequently botched (Disney did no service to the Scot Kenneth Grahame by turning his splendidly English Mr Badger into a kailyarded tartan-sauced MacBadger) and Marcello Magni's direction in its quiet control has shown how to do it. On this showing, the future of Scottish theatre knows how to use its international resources. One spoonface - and one Skye - may not make a summer, but they give a fair forecast for an early spring.

But numbers are depressing. Despite foot-and-mouth, international finance, terrorism, theatre profiteers, Philistinism, and the regrettable refusal of modern city councillors to denounce Fringe

productions thus booming their sales, the general intake seems to have been up even if individual productions had many tales of woe. The depressing numbers are those of Scottish productions. If quality seems if anything higher in 2001, quantity is certainly down. Scottish student playwrights must fight their corners and strut their stuff, and running for cover in disgust at yah takeovers is contemptible abdication. Student bodies from the USA, from England, &c, thrust themselves forward: are Scottish students seeking reputations for forelock-touching deference towards their betters? *Oú sont les neiges d'aujourd'hui?* The only student playwright from a Scottish university whose work I saw was Swedish: Andreas Belzer, just graduated from Edinburgh, had the pyrotechnically-named Loki Productions stage his *Mina*, a post-Coward *mise-en-scène* combining Oscar-winner with La Belle Dame Sans Merci in a particularly sinister harmless guise. It would be nice to inflate the figures by adding Belzer to the Scottish total, and Scotland will be fortunate should he remain here to be added to it. He may have a most remarkable future. His skill is faultless in what is not his own language (not that it was Walter Scott's language either). He can disintegrate pretension and subvert solipsism swiftly and surely enough to remind you that Ibsen came from the same peninsula and was, indeed, born in what was then the same kingdom. His dialogue was witty, his philosophy mordant, and his irony keen without being Narcissistic. His play was well-made, and well-observed, and his characters credible if seldom likeable.

If Belzer offers one challenge to the future of Scottish theatre, there were countless others. Are we in fact making sufficient use of our past in facing the future? James Bridie's grandson, James Mavor, gave the Fringe a fine play, *Terminal*, about a dozen years ago, but how well are we inspired by the sublime generation of Scottish poets who dominated the skyline in the third decade of the twentieth century, Sydney Goodsir Smith being one? Has anyone even started to look at the roots of their genius and the nature of their interaction for purposes of drama? Yet so much in the lives of MacDiarmid, MacCaig, Muir, MacLean and the rest of them turns on informed speculation, of a kind which biography, history, criticism cannot hope fully to answer and only inspired artistic dialogue might reach. Not all plays about poets have to be about Byron and Shelley. Even the most famous poet-playwright of mid-century Wales, Dylan Thomas, gave Edinburgh 2001 a legacy of real beauty and rich music when his daughter, Aeron Thomas, rendered some of his most haunting lines for *One Night in Laugharne* at Greyfriars Kirk House for Dodo Modern Poets. She also spoke of some of her own poetry, and told some stories of her father. Her English was gentle, measured, a little like the Reverend Eli Jenkins in *Under Milk Wood* when he was not being bardic, but as Welsh words and names flowed from her the bardic took over. Her Cornish Colleague Sue Johns offered a few words of Cornish, but much more mechanically, and her verse and that of the third performer Patric Cunnane seemed too forceful to compete with the cunning delicacy of Dylan Thomas, or the more modest simplicity of his daughter. One would like to feel a future Scottish Fringe playwright being inspired by listening to Aeron Thomas, all the more as her father's Welsh credentials have been so fiercely challenged, and yet in her hands his Welshness could never be gainsaid nor the sweetness of his language be questioned. Deep waited for deep to call to.

For when all is said, theatre must breed theatre. One of the happiest revivals of this year's Fringe was Nick Salamone's *Moscow* restaged by Guy Masterson. The idea in itself seems almost like a Fringe joke: three apparently dead gay actors rehearsing Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* in the intervals of being attracted to, and repelled by, one another, declaiming their sentiments in song, and trying to come to terms with a condition of life hideously akin to Sartre's *Huis-Clos*. For this part of the revival (some of which ran in the Assembly Rooms) the main theatre in Kommedia Southside was dominated by the three actors to its utmost diagonal extent, holding between them an entire auditorium on four levels (presumably something of the kind was managed in the Assembly Ballroom, but being neater in space that probably failed to reach the authority conferred by the sprawling layers of breadth over length at the Southside). It is in fact a synthesis, a trinity, a sacrament. Salamone took the hopeless negativism of Sartre and overturned it, conceded so much

of his argument in the triangle of repulsion and yet showed how for the sake of theatre itself, and what Chekhov laid on his successor for belief in production of his play, the synthesis arises into frightened, but courageous, affirmation. The feel-good gay play (in presumably all senses), the varieties of the 'queer with a tear', had taken their politically correct little bows, and England - or whatever - could say that every man that night had done his duty. *Moscow* was as unlike these cosy-fan-tutti-frutties as the Kailyard to *The Cherry Orchard*. It was the work of a deeply professional actor/playwright (a Banquo for all Macbeths in the Frantic Redhead creation of their Greyfriars production), and one who had seen and scripted the horror of AIDS in California. *Moscow* is a profoundly Catholic play, seeking for genuine love, recognising that in the art of the theatre is the means of recovering ourselves by rebuilding in the light of a master, rejecting the mutual destructiveness that paves the way to hell, finding the truth in the cultivation of masks as Wilde had taught us. It was the moment of supreme theatre for me at Fringe 2001: a play had become the sacred renewal for which drama had been originally designed.

It is such search of our past and consecration of our future for which we must hope in the next stages of Scottish theatre.

It is in that spirit that the man we honour in this *Festschrift* has taught and practiced it here.

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Endnotes.

¹Edward Teschemacher, quoted as epigraph for Monica Dickens, 'Flowers on the Grass' (London, 1949).