

'By Policy a Native Theatre': Glasgow Unity Theatre and the Significance of Robert Mitchell's Scottish Adaptation of *The Lower Depths*

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Glasgow Unity Theatre was established in 1940 and staged its first production in January 1941. It was formed through the amalgamation of a number of left-wing amateur companies in the city: the Workers' Theatre Group, the Clarion Players, the Glasgow (formerly Scottish Labour College) Players, the Transport Players, and the Jewish Institute Players.¹ For the first few years Unity functioned as an amateur company but at the end of the war in 1945 it

decided to form a professional company as London Unity had done. Thereafter there were two Unity companies, one amateur, whose productions were mainly directed by Donald MacBean formerly of the Transport Players and one professional under the directorship of Robert Mitchell of the Glasgow Players.²

In keeping with its roots in socialist amateur theatre groups with a strong working-class base, such as those from which MacBean and Mitchell came, Unity's personnel were, as stated in the company's magazine *Scots Theatre*, 'drawn from the ranks of ordinary working people, whose background and everyday life is identical with the masses who form its audience'.³ Robert Macauley Mitchell exemplified this, being an electrician by trade, 'and during the war a [trade union] convenor in one of Scotland's largest factories'.⁴

Mitchell has been credited with leading Glasgow Unity to turn professional and, through his appointment as full-time director of the professional wing of the company, with winning for it 'an outstanding reputation that surpassed momentarily the standing of its London counterpart'.⁵ The first production in the début professional season at the Athenaeum Theatre in Glasgow in April 1945 was Maxim Gorki's *The Lower Depths*, adapted and directed by Mitchell. (Just before this, in the same month, an excerpt from Mitchell's *The Lower Depths*, performed by Unity, was awarded 'the best and most successful production' at the Scottish Community Drama Festival at the Lyric Theatre in Glasgow.⁶) A reviewer in *The Scotsman* wrote of the Athenaeum début:

It is more than thirty years since [*The Lower Depths*] was produced in Glasgow. Russian films have acquainted us with the texture of Gorki's work, and by that excellent standard the atmosphere created in last night's performance was truly authentic [...] a really impressive performance was achieved.⁷

The impact of the production was such that the show transferred to London, where it received an equally enthusiastic reception. According to a correspondent in *Scots Theatre*,

the entire London press bowed the knee to Glasgow Unity Theatre's production of Gorki's *The Lower Depths*. Each time there was a chorus of amazement that such good things should emerge from the unknown and unsung northern mists.⁸

Unity itself noted that the cast, who had given up their Fair Fortnight holiday, 'were amply rewarded by their reception in England's capital, praise being given particularly to their fresh and vital interpretation'.⁹ The production was revived in 1947 and taken to the first Edinburgh International Festival, where it was hailed by *The Glasgow Herald* as 'undoubtedly another triumph for the Unity players'.¹⁰ It played in tandem with the company's production of a work in a traditional Scots, Robert McLellan's *The Laird o' Torwatletie*.¹¹ The intention had also been to include a third play, in a contemporary Glaswegian idiom, Ena Lamont Stewart's *Starched Aprons*, but the withdrawal of Arts Council support for Unity's visit to the Festival scuppered that plan. A private donation made possible the company's appearance at the Festival, but on a reduced scale with *The Lower Depths* and *The Laird o' Torwatletie*.¹² David Hutchison suggests that Unity 'could claim to have founded the Edinburgh Festival Fringe since it performed [those shows ...] without official support'.¹³

Mitchell's choice of *The Lower Depths* to adapt accorded with Unity's general policy of programming plays by authors with left-leaning sympathies. A feature of this policy, too, was that, in Donald Campbell's words, it 'showed a predilection for Russian and American drama'.¹⁴ (In further confirmation of the political attraction that Russia held, Mitchell had directed for Unity a large open-air performance of a *Masque of Russia* in 1942.¹⁵) Russian playwright Gorki was a particular source of inspiration, as seen in the fact that each issue of Unity's magazine, *Scots Theatre*, carried a quotation from him on the front cover by way of a statement of the company's guiding principle: 'The theatre is the school of the people - it makes them think and it makes them feel'.¹⁶

Gorki had further significance, for a reason noted by Colin Chambers in his study of Glasgow Unity's fraternal company, London Unity. Of the latter's policy, Chambers writes: 'The idea was [...] to create a distinct "house" style within an ensemble that would go some way towards realising the anti-commercial ideas of Stanislavsky, whose methods, with the plays of Gorky, represented the model of socialist realism that was to be emulated'.¹⁷ Clear echoes of this - and of Gorki's notion of theatre as 'the school of the people' - may be seen in a declaration by the Glasgow company in 1943:

We in Glasgow Unity Theatre are a group of Glasgow workers interested in the theatre, who intend to put on real plays for the entertainment and education of our fellow workers. Our main purpose is to build a people's theatre in Glasgow. All our activities are centred to this aim, for we believe that Glasgow has a great need for a Real Theatre, where life can be presented and interpreted without prejudice or without being biased by the controlling interests which have so far strangled the professional theatre.¹⁸

This 'real theatre', or 'people's theatre', was to be achieved in part through choice of plays and a style of performance that together emphasised authenticity and social realism.¹⁹ 'Real theatre' would flow from having a company of actors drawn mainly from a working-class background who would look to their own lives in developing a company style that was true-to-life, and who would operate as a democratic, co-operative ensemble:

Unity believes in the group ideal. Each play is thoroughly discussed by the producer and players before it goes on the floor. There are no stars - only co-workers co-operating towards the idea of the production

previously worked out as a collective of which the producer is the leader.²⁰

For the reasons noted above, then, choosing to adapt a Russian play, and one by Maxim Gorki in particular, had an obvious significance for Robert Mitchell in the context of Glasgow Unity's overall policy and political sympathies. A further appeal doubtless lay in *The Lower Depths*' urban setting and lower-class characters. This conformed with Unity's deliberate wish to make up for the failure by earlier twentieth-century Scottish companies - the Scottish National Players especially - to present plays about working class, urban experience;²¹ and it sat with Unity's condemnation, for similar reasons, of Scottish companies contemporaneous with it:

In the new Scottish theatre there are two divisions: primarily middle-class repertoires and writers whose art is seen in Perth, the Glasgow Citizens' Theatre and elsewhere: and the tougher working-class drama and performances to be seen at Glasgow Unity theatre.²²

Before the founding of the professional company in 1945, Glasgow Unity had staged new Scottish work with urban working class settings, such as James Barke's *Major Operation*, set in the world of Clydeside shipyard workers. But 1945 and the commencement of Robert Mitchell's directorship of the professional wing marked a higher level of commitment to the encouragement of new Scottish plays. Colin Chambers observes of Mitchell's *The Lower Depths*: 'The group's commitment to "a theatre indigenous to the people of Glasgow in particular and Scotland in general" was reflected in this production which was *performed in the idiom of the actors without any attempt by them to become "Russian"* [author's emphasis].²³ To that statement of policy which Chambers incorporates here,²⁴ can be added another by Robert Mitchell: 'What we try to create is a native theatre, something which is essentially reflecting the lives of the ordinary people in Scotland.'²⁵ Chambers detects this more Scottish policy, dating from 1945, in the 'idiom' of Mitchell's adaptation; that is, in its language, and in the acting style that that language released. Significantly, and in confirmation of Chambers's claim, the conjunction of these two elements as defining features was highlighted by N. Thomson in an article, 'Native Drama', in *Scots Theatre* (1946):

Glasgow Unity Theatre, officially naming itself a Scottish people's theatre, is soundly orientated to achieve this enormous task. It has always been a hundred per cent people's theatre [...] It is also by policy a native theatre, deliberately rejecting the accent of the London West End stage and searching for an independent technique which, far from trying to root out and replace *the local speech and characteristics of its artists* [author's emphasis], seeks to present them on the stage as effectively as possible, and in so doing evolves a new, distinct, truly Scottish dramatic medium.²⁶

In that same year, a conference on Scottish Drama was held in Glasgow. A report on the conference noted that Robert Mitchell was there and had made a spoken contribution to the effect that Glasgow Unity

had taken Gorki's *The Lower Depths* and adapted it to the Scottish idiom with tremendous success, particularly during its short London Season. Apparently, Mr Mitchell remarked, smiling, our ugly, monotonous

Glasgow accent that we were so afraid of became to the ears of the Sassenach a beautiful, euphonious, rhythmical speech! *Unity believed in this use of the Scottish idiom and rhythm - plus an artistic policy to develop it* [author's emphasis].²⁷

As can be seen from the above quotations, and the emphases added, harnessing the particularities of Scots speech -- and Glasgow working class speech in particular -- was central to Unity's pro-Scottish policy, and was seen to complement efforts to achieve an 'independent technique' in acting; that is an acting style based on 'the local speech and characteristics' of the company's ensemble of working-class actors. As the first production directed by Robert Mitchell as the company's first full-time director of productions, and the first staged by the professional arm of the company, *The Lower Depths* had special significance as an exemplar of the 'artistic policy' to which Mitchell referred.

Mitchell later confirmed this when interviewed in 1967 about his work with Glasgow Unity in the 1940s. He stated that he considered *The Lower Depths* to be 'one of the outstanding achievements of the company', and an exemplary embodiment of his and the company's philosophy and working methods:

It started off by me doing a rough breakdown of it into the idiom -- not so much the full dialect of Glasgow, not making it a Scottish play as such, but a changing of the idiom so it became easy to the tongues of the Glasgow Unity. Because, in this theory of mine about the Native Theatre, we took people who were riveters from the Clydeside, office girls, housewives, all sorts of people who were not trained actors in any way. The first task the director had to do was get these people sufficiently relaxed so they could behave simply as themselves in front of an audience. [...] *The Lower Depths* is an interesting case where we took a foreign play, a translation, and then began to do the same thing with it as we had done with the plays written by the local people. In other words, we broke down the rhythms of *The Lower Depths* into our own local rhythms.²⁸

The impact of this approach on an audience, specifically in the case of *The Lower Depths*, is illustrated by the comments of a reviewer in *The Scotsman* when Unity's production featured at the Edinburgh Festival in 1947:

Those who read their programme before the curtain went up at the Little Theatre last night and noticed that the play they were to see was set in Moscow, without also noticing the line which might have warned them that the speech was Scots, may have felt a slight jar. The convention which teaches us to expect English in our theatre, even in a play like Maxim Gorki's "The Lower Depths," must, however, have been quickly destroyed, and the newer one established.

There is no doubt that Robert Mitchell was right in so adapting the play, although he has not gone to extremes in finding a Scottish basis for it. He would, at any rate, have had the warm approval [...] of all those who contend that the amateur actor should never change his voice in a character part. Glasgow Unity Theatre is not an amateur organisation, although at times it includes amateurs in its productions, but, as the

bulk of its players are Scottish, the wisdom of Robert Mitchell's decision may go unchallenged.²⁹

Leaving aside the sting in the tail of that last remark, one notes the acknowledgement that the language of Mitchell's adaptation, and the actors' use of their natural voices, challenged then theatrical convention. The reviewer acknowledges too, that Glasgow Unity Theatre is not an amateur company, but sometimes features amateur actors in its productions; yet, at the same time, he applies to the company as a whole the belief held by some that 'the amateur actor should never change his voice'. There is an apparent confusion here which, in fairness, may seem evident, too, in Mitchell's just-quoted remarks in his 1967 interview regarding Unity's philosophy and working methods, which could be interpreted as applying only to untutored amateurs entering the company. But in those remarks he is referring to the application to the Gorki play of a pre-existing system 'done with the plays written by the local people', and it was a system that comprised part of his theory of 'Native Theatre' and its resultant fostering of a true-to-life acting style which encouraged Unity's mostly proletarian actors to value and draw on their personal experience. The application of this approach was common to both the amateur *and* professional wings of the company, and it helped to make possible on occasion, as was the case with *The Lower Depths*, the combining of professionals and amateurs in productions requiring a larger cast than the full-timers alone could provide. Also, significantly, Glasgow Unity preferred to describe its amateur and professional wings as 'full-time' and 'part-time' rather than as 'professional' and 'amateur'; and, as John Hill has observed, '[t]he part-time company was in no sense in awe of the full-timers, and carried out an ambitious programme of its own', including British premieres of foreign plays and of Ena Lamont Stewart's *Men Should Weep*.³⁰

As a socialist company there was of course an ideological principle informing this blurring of any line of demarcation or of superior-to-inferior relationship, but it also signified that, irrespective of degree of experience, all of Unity's performers came up through the amateur ranks. Of relevance here is a point made by David Hutchison in his study of a Glasgow Unity actor who achieved subsequent fame, Roddy McMillan. McMillan, he says, along with his early mentor Duncan Macrae, came up 'through the amateur movement, as they had to at a time when there was no professional training available for actors in Scotland'.³¹ (It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the validity of this perception, but awaiting research is the history of the Edinburgh College of Speech and Drama, the precursor of Queen Margaret University College's Drama Department, which was functioning during the 1930s and 1940s; as was, until certainly 1939, and perhaps 1945, the Edinburgh School of Speech Training and Dramatic Art.³²) Unity devised plans to set up its own drama school, but they were unfulfilled. However, 'some significant advances were made through the adoption of an "apprentice system", whereby an inexperienced actor could join the company at a reduced wage'.³³ One consequence of the perceived lack of appropriate professional training was that when Glasgow Unity set up its full-time company, that company was, in John Hill's words, 'drawn entirely from current members of the group - a significant contrast with the Citizens [Theatre], who on their formation had hired an English director [...] and a nucleus of West End actors'.³⁴

The rejection of the Citizens' route by Unity was part-ideological, in class and national terms, and represented a different vision for Scottish theatre. It was noted earlier that Unity condemned the Citizens' as 'middle-class'; and Winifred Bannister, in *James Bridie and His Theatre* - Bridie having founded the Citizens', which was inaugurated in 1943 - offers the comparative assessment that Glasgow Unity was '[t]he first really vital force

towards a Scottish national theatre [... and] the first Scottish theatre to break clean away from English manners'.³⁵ That breaking away from a theatrical convention of English manners, in language and voice, and in other ways, can be seen at work in the company's production of *The Lower Depths*, as evidenced by *The Scotsman* reviewer feeling compelled to note how it confounded '[t]he convention which teaches us to expect English in our theatre, even in a play like Maxim Gorki's'.

As an amateur company, Unity had previously staged some foreign plays in translation,³⁶ but *The Lower Depths* was the first such play that it performed in a Glaswegian or Scottish idiom. One might have anticipated from this - particularly after the critical and box office success of *The Lower Depths* in Glasgow and London - that Mitchell would have gone on to adapt, or to commission adaptations or translations of, other foreign classics, in the spirit of his statement in an essay, 'Foundations of a Scots Theatre Tradition':

The main problems facing any theatre group in Scotland today, that is any theatre group such as Glasgow Unity, which sets out not only to produce plays which hold their position in world literature but also plays which reflect the life and times of the world and country we live in, are two-fold: How to give the classics new life and meaning, and how to find Scottish plays.³⁷

This dual aim was espoused by others in Unity; indeed, when *The Lower Depths* was revived for the Edinburgh Festival in 1947, the continuing relevance of it was confirmed in the souvenir brochure: 'Our aims for the immediate future are simple: to present side by side with the best works of international literature as many new and virile Scottish plays as we can find'.³⁸ In the absence of direct comment by Mitchell, it would seem that the commissioning and producing of successful 'new and virile Scottish plays' reduced the need for Scottish translations or adaptations of foreign classics in emulation of the lead given by *The Lower Depths*. Mitchell played an instrumental role in this as commissioner and director, as seen in his involvement with such major successes for the company, all of which he directed, as Ena Lamont Stewart's *Starched Aprons* (1945) and *Men Should Weep* (1947), Robert McLeish's *The Gorbals Story* (1946), George Munro's *Gold in His Boots* (1947), and Benedick Scott's *The Lambs of God* (1948). It has been said that one of these, *The Gorbals Story*, is 'a natural successor to Gorky's *The Lower Depths* [in Mitchell's Scots adaptation]', and 'represents a notable example of native socialist realism that in production appears to have surpassed any equivalent attempts made by London Unity'.³⁹ In the success enjoyed by these plays (in London in some cases as well as in Scotland), and in the realisation through them of a 'school' of Scottish social realist dramatists engaging with the realities of urban working-class life and doing so in an urban demotic Scots,⁴⁰ Unity's aims were being achieved without the need of follow-up translations/adaptations to Mitchell's *The Lower Depths*. The breakthrough that Mitchell thought was imminent in 1946, as expressed by him below, was being achieved:

[T]he Scottish public is now demanding Scottish plays and that demand will inevitably be followed by a demand for Scottish plays to be presented by Scottish actors. When that happens, and when managements realise that a Scotsman can become an actor without first spending years of his life getting the Scots quality knocked out of him, hope will dawn for the Scottish theatre.⁴¹

Scottish plays, Scottish subject matter, Scottish actors, a Scottish acting style, Scottish

speech; as John Hill notes:

In terms of self-definition and choice of plays [...] a definite emphasis in favour of the Scots component began to make itself felt. Thus Unity's initial war-time formulation of their policy was, within a few years, to become understood in more exclusively Scottish terms.⁴²

Internationalism was not abandoned, but the focus had shifted to the native and the contemporary in response to the discovery and nurturing of Scottish social realists. Importantly, Mitchell's groundbreaking approach to a foreign classic, as evidenced by the arresting effect that the working-class, Glasgow-voiced production had on reviewers in Scotland and in London, was also an assertive policy statement enshrining past amateur and future professional intent on the part of the company in its objective of establishing, to quote formulations used by its members, the 'Foundations of a Scots Theatre Tradition' combining the twin principles of 'People's Theatre' and 'Native Theatre' in a new, consciously national enterprise.

The significance, as a contribution to enacting this, of Mitchell's Scottish adaptation of *The Lower Depths* encourages scrutiny of his previously unexamined text in order to better understand its contemporary impact and representative importance. Only one copy of the script seems to have survived: it is held in the Lord Chamberlain's collection of playscripts in the Department of Manuscripts, The British Library.⁴³ The apparent narrow survival of that script is symptomatic of a general problem that has beset Scottish Drama; and it is a problem that was one of the reasons behind the setting up of the Scottish Society of Playwrights in 1973, as noted by Audrey Bain in her survey of the SSP's history:

One of the Society's original objectives was the preservation and dissemination of the texts of Scottish plays. Hector MacMillan in particular was concerned at the apparent disappearance of important plays of the past. Many seemed lost, even by their authors. *The Gorbals Story* was saved from extinction by the SSP. Its author, Robert McLeish, disillusioned with theatre, had neglected to preserve his work. A single typescript copy was eventually procured by a colleague. Roddy MacMillan's *All in Good Faith* was likewise saved for the nation by an actor who had starred in it and had kept her script.⁴⁴

It was noted earlier that one writer on Glasgow Unity has suggested that *The Gorbals Story* (1946) can be seen as a natural successor to the company's production of *The Lower Depths*.⁴⁵ Although *The Lower Depths* proved a success for the company and was taken to Edinburgh and London, *The Gorbals Story* outstripped it by far and became a huge hit, as Linda Mackenney notes:

It acquired, in its day, an almost legendary status and significance. It was performed more often than any of Glasgow Unity's other plays -- more than six hundred times in the three years between 1946 and 1949. It toured to theatres and halls all over Scotland and England and played to larger audiences than Glasgow Unity had ever known before. It was seen by over one hundred thousand people in the first six months alone. It was also made into a feature film which was subsequently released in 1950.⁴⁶

That a play that enjoyed such extraordinary success in its day should be 'saved from extinction' through its survival in a single typescript copy, as described, places in a larger context the survival of Mitchell's adaptation of *The Lower Depths* in, it would seem, just one surviving copy.

The version of the script represented by the British Library copy poses a problem in relation to what has been said earlier regarding the anticipated linguistic nature of Mitchell's Scottish adaptation; namely, distinctively Scots or Glaswegian items are very few in number. The following list, giving beside each item the respective character's name and the page number in the British Library typescript, represents the sum total of Scotticisms/Glaswegianisms:

wi' (x2) KVASHNYA (p. 1)
a' KVASHNYA
gruntin' about BUBNOFF
sell mysel' KVASHNYA
polisman (x2) KLETCH
foolin' NASTYA

cleanin' KLETCH (p. 2)

gibberin' BUBNOFF (p. 3)

playin' KLETCH (p. 4)
tryin' SATINE
cursin' SATINE

sittin' KLETCH (p. 5)
wi' KLETCH
buzzin' SATINE
the day BUBNOFF
feelin' ACTOR

nae ALYOSHA (p. 13)
laddie LUKA

anythin' NASTYA (p. 15)

a wee while longer (x2) ANNA (p. 22)

jawin' BUBNOFF (p. 24)

a rammy SATINE (p. 40)

Although *-in* endings are not peculiar to Scotland, the more distinctly Scots items above lead one to interpret those endings as signalling here Scots speech or accent.

Since Mitchell's typescript runs to forty-nine pages, it is evident from this list that overtly Scots features are extremely infrequent; moreover, whilst they occur with highest incidence in the first five pages, in the speech of six separate characters, thereafter they

appear very sporadically, and erratically. The first five pages lead one to expect that, in particular, Kletch, Bubnoff, Satine, and Kvashnya will to some degree be Scots speakers, but this is not sustained. That said, there are a few instances, spoken by those characters and others, of what can arguably be interpreted as covert Glaswegianisms in idiom and/or invited voice: 'Mind you and sweep up' (KVASHNYA, p. 3), 'I'm frozen' (BUBNOFF, p. 9), 'yapping at us' (PEPEL, p. 9), 'On the batter again?' (BUBNOFF, p. 13), 'pure carelessness' (KVASHNYA, p. 17), 'I'll arrange some [*sic*] wedding for you' (VASSILISA, p. 36), 'Chuck it' (SATINE, p. 46), 'From now on, pal...' (BUBNOFF, p. 48). But, again, such instances are very much the exception rather than the rule.

The question therefore arises of why this extant script seems so at variance with what one would anticipate from the earlier cited references to Mitchell's adaptation having been couched in a Scottish idiom. Leaving aside the relatively rare instances of a Scots/Glaswegian inflection as indicated, the language is an unremarkable standard English, albeit coloured at times by British idiomatic usages. In illustration of this, the following exchange features the three characters with the highest count on the above list of Scots items, Bubnoff, Satine, and Kletch, whose language is more typically as shown here:

Bubnoff.(to *Satine*) Friend. I've looked for you in every
pub in town. Take this bottle, my hands are full.

Satine.Put the pretzels on the table. Then you'll have a
free hand.

Bubnoff.Right. Hey, you donkey. Isn't he a clever fellow?

Mied.All crooks are clever, I know. They couldn't do a
thing without brains. An honest man is right even
if he is an idiot. But a crook must have brains.
But speaking about camels, you're wrong. You can
ride them. They have no horns and no teeth
either.

Bubnoff.Where's everybody? Why is there nobody here? Come
out, it's my treat. Who's in the corner?

Satine.How soon will you drink up everything you've got?
Muggins!

Bubnoff.Very soon. I haven't got much this time. Zob,
where's Zob?

Klutch.(*crossing to table*) He isn't here.

Bubnoff.Waughrr? Bulldog! Brr-zz-zz! -- Turkey-cock!

Don't bark and don't growl. Drink, and be happy.

It's my treat. Fellow, I love to treat. If I was

rich I'd run a free pub, so help me God, I would,

with an orchestra and singers. Come everybody,

drink and eat - listen to the music - and rest

in peace. Beggars, come all you Beggars - into

my pub - everything on the house. Satine, you

can have half my Capital, just like that.

Satine.You'd better give me all you've got right away.

Bubnoff.All my Capital? Right now? Well, here's a rouble,

here's twenty copeks, five copeks, sun-flower

seeds and that's all. (pp. 47-8)

The language here is relatively colourless - and, indeed, the dialogue is in some respects lifeless - yet there is ample opportunity both to Glaswegianize it and to inject more colloquial energy. Given this, and given the praise that Unity's production of Mitchell's adaptation received, both for its own qualities and for its use of Glasgow voices, it would seem that this script does not represent the version of the play that was performed. In this regard, it is relevant to mention that Alasdair Cameron has drawn attention to the fact that the copy of Ena Lamont Stewart's *Men Should Weep* (a play commissioned and directed by Mitchell) which is similarly held in the British Library, 'contains some words which have been Glescasised: "pebble" becomes "chuckie", "floors" become "flairs"'. His explanation is that 'other members of the Company must have helped her out with her dialogue', which was a characteristic of Unity's way of working.⁴⁷ John Hill has similarly noted this approach in action in relation to *The Gorbals Story*, where the company 'became co-partners in the script, remoulding it to fit better their needs'.⁴⁸ A recently reported interview with two surviving company members of Glasgow Unity, one of whom, Russell Hunter, performed in *The Lower Depths*, confirms that this is indeed what happened with Mitchell's Gorki adaptation.⁴⁹ They recollected that Mitchell based his version on a then recently published American edition of an English translation by Alexander Bakshy.⁵⁰ Because the company could not afford to buy copies of Bakshy's translation for the cast, Mitchell typed it out, but Glaswegianized it to a certain extent. The cast then further Glaswegianized the language as they worked on the script in rehearsals; thus the final performance text was a result of collaborative effort. The interviewees confirmed that the production was Glasgow-voiced, but could not recall in sufficient detail how Glaswegian was the language. They said that a rehearsal script, with an actor's handwritten changes, would need to be unearthed to establish the matter. This

evidence would therefore seem to confirm that the version of *The Lower Depths* preserved in the British Library represents some kind of early draft which was subsequently Glaswegianized to a more pronounced degree by Mitchell and/or the cast. In Mitchell's own recollection, as reported in the 1967 interview quoted from earlier, he speaks of his 'initial rough breakdown of it [the play] into the idiom -- not so much the full dialect of Glasgow [...] but a changing of the idiom so that it became easy to the tongue' of the Glaswegian cast; however, this puzzling statement only serves to contribute to the lack of clarity and certainty in the matter.

On the evidence of the surviving typescript (as well as press reviews), the play was not adapted to Scotland, but retained its Russian setting and names. The only evidence in the script of adaptation is that on some occasions -- but, curiously, not all -- Russian currency had originally been adapted to British; however, in each instance a handwritten revision has reinstated Russian currency: 'five bob', for example, becoming 'five kopecks' (p. 4). The description of Mitchell's version as 'a Scottish adaptation' in the typescript, and in Unity's production material, presumably therefore refers to the language or 'idiom' he employed and not to relocation of the setting.⁵¹ As late as 1986, theatre critic Cordelia Oliver could still vividly recall seeing the 1945 production: 'I shall never forget the impact of the rough Glasgow speech of Archie Duncan and the rest in Unity's version of *The Lower Depths*'.⁵² Her reference to 'rough Glasgow speech' is tantalising, in that it could refer to accent alone or to an urban demotic Scots. But the shock impact to which she refers, and the earlier-noted references to Unity's wish to harness demotic speech, as instanced by plays by writers such as Ena Lamont Stewart and Robert McLeish, together point, along with the recollections of the two company members, to employment of a naturalistic urban Scots of some kind. This interpretation is supported by contemporary press comment: as noted earlier, a review in *The Scotsman* stated that 'the speech was Scots'; indeed, the same review also described the adaptation as 'in the garb of old Gaul'.⁵³ A reviewer in *The Glasgow Herald* observed: 'Although the play has Moscow as its setting, the dialect is all Scots'.⁵⁴ And when *The Scotsman* carried a report on the withdrawal of Arts Council support for the company's visit to the Edinburgh Festival in 1947, it referred to *The Lower Depths* as 'an adaptation to Scots dialect of a Gorki play, with a setting in Russia'; which reads as a description provided by Glasgow Unity itself at the Press Conference on which the report is based.⁵⁵ There is, therefore, a seeming disjunction between statements such as these and the evidence of the British Library typescript. Unless and until a rehearsal script emerges, the exact nature of the language of Mitchell's adaptation as performed must remain inconclusive.

Unfortunately, then, close examination of the only, seemingly, surviving copy of Mitchell's Scottish adaptation of *The Lower Depths* casts little additional light on the representative significance of the production that has been highlighted here. But the findings from that examination, provisional though they must meantime remain, do not detract from the argument that the creation and staging of a Scottish version of a Russian classic as the professional company's first production can be seen as paradigmatic - consciously so in Mitchell's case - of Glasgow Unity's commitment to enacting a policy of 'Native Theatre', which would encompass the concepts of 'People's Theatre' and 'Real Theatre' in

deliberately rejecting the accent of the London West End stage and searching for an independent technique which, far from trying to root out and replace the local speech and characteristics of its artists, seeks to present them on the stage as effectively as possible, and in so doing evolves a new, distinct, truly Scottish dramatic medium.⁵⁶

Mitchell's self-styled 'Scottish adaptation' of an internationally significant play by a Russian revolutionary writer, centring in class terms on 'the lower depths' of society, also tellingly demonstrated that, for Glasgow Unity, the nationalist impulse behind adoption of a Native Theatre policy and the quest for 'an independent technique' was not incompatible with advocacy of socialist and internationalist ideals.

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Endnotes

¹ John Hill, 'Towards a Scottish People's Theatre: the Rise and Fall of Glasgow Unity', in *Theatre Quarterly*, 7:27 (Autumn 1977), p. 61.

² David Hutchison, *The Modern Scottish Theatre* (Glasgow: Molendinar Press, 1977), p. 104.

³ Quoted in David Hutchison, *The Modern Scottish Theatre* (Glasgow: Molendinar Press, 1977), p. 106.

⁴ Colin Chambers, *The Story of Unity Theatre* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989), p. 281. See, too, Linda Mackenney, 'Glasgow Unity Theatre: The War Years', in *Scottish Theatre News*, 28 (June 1983), p. 3.

⁵ Colin Chambers, *The Story of Unity Theatre* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989), p. 281.

⁶ *The Scotsman*, 11 April 1945, p. 3.

⁷ *The Scotsman*, 13 April 1945, p. 3. This review describes *The Lower Depths* as Glasgow Unity's 'first production at the Athenaeum'. It should be acknowledged that while others, such as John Hill, in 'Towards a Scottish People's Theatre', in *Theatre Quarterly*, 7:27 (Autumn 1977), p. 62, also regard it as the first professional production at the Athenaeum, David Hutchison, p. 104, credits Sean O'Casey's *Purple Dust* as the professional company's debut production on 9 April 1946.

⁸ R. Wilson Mackenzie, 'Four Million Cinderellas', in *Scots Theatre*, 6 (May 1947), p. 14.

⁹ 'Glasgow Unity Theatre', anonymous introduction in *Souvenir Brochure: Glasgow Unity Theatre: [Edinburgh] International Arts Festival: Season Aug.--Sept. 1947*, p. 1. A copy is held in the Scottish Theatre Archive, Glasgow University Library: STA F.m Box 8/44.

- ¹⁰ *The Glasgow Herald*, 2 September 1947, p. 2.
- ¹¹ Robert McLellan, *Torwatletie* (Glasgow: William MacLellan, 1945). *Torwatletie* is also included in Robert McLellan, *Collected Plays: Volume One* (London: John Calder, 1981), pp. 1-60.
- ¹² For a report of a Press Conference that Unity called regarding the Arts Council's withdrawal of support, see *The Scotsman*, 12 August 1947, p. 3. See, too, the account by John Hill, 'Towards a Scottish People's Theatre', in *Theatre Quarterly*, 7:27 (Autumn 1977), pp. 67-8.
- ¹³ David Hutchison, *The Modern Scottish Theatre* (Glasgow: Molendinar Press, 1977), p. 105.
- ¹⁴ Donald Campbell, *Playing for Scotland: A History of the Scottish Stage 1715-1965* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1996), p. 110.
- ¹⁵ See Linda MacKenney, 'Popular Theatre in Scotland 1900-1950', in souvenir programme *Clydebuilt: A Season of Scottish Popular Theatre from the '20s, '30s & '40s* [Edinburgh?: 7:84 Theatre Company (Scotland)?, 1982?], p. 15.
- ¹⁶ *Scots Theatre* ran for six issues, from September 1946 to May 1947. Copies are held in the Scottish Theatre Archive: STA A.r. Box 2.
- ¹⁷ Colin Chambers, *The Story of Unity Theatre* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989), p. 242.
- ¹⁸ Quoted in John Hill, 'Glasgow Unity Theatre: The Search for a "Scottish People's Theatre"', in *New Edinburgh Review*, 40 (February 1978), p. 30.
- ¹⁹ For discussion of Glasgow Unity's promotion of social realism, see Linda Mackenney's introduction to Robert MacLeish, *The Gorbals Story* (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications, 1985), pp. 15-16. John Hill discusses Unity's group ideal and acting style in 'Towards a Scottish People's Theatre', in *Theatre Quarterly*, 7:27 (Autumn 1977), pp. 64-5. His concluding judgement is: 'And accompanying this new drama came a new style of acting owing as much to the life around it as it did to traditional dramatic technique. Founded on natural talent, it drew upon the actor's own experience of the world he presented to convey authentically the feel of contemporary Scotland. It was an acting style not born of any drama school, and one of Unity's specific contributions to the theatre.' (p. 70).
- ²⁰ *Souvenir Brochure: Glasgow Unity Theatre: [Edinburgh] International Arts Festival: Season Aug.--Sept. 1947*, p.2.
- ²¹ See David Hutchison, *The Modern Scottish Theatre* (Glasgow: Molendinar Press, 1977), p.105; and Mackenney's introduction to *The Gorbals Story* (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications, 1985), p. 12.
- ²² Quoted in David Hutchison, *The Modern Scottish Theatre* (Glasgow: Molendinar Press, 1977), p.106.
- ²³ Colin Chambers, *The Story of Unity Theatre* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989), p.

281.

²⁴ Also quoted in John Hill, 'Glasgow Unity Theatre: The Search for a "Scottish People's Theatre"', in *New Edinburgh Review*, 40 (February 1978), p. 30.

²⁵ Robert Mitchell in *Edinburgh Evening Dispatch*, 5 July 1946; cited in Hill, 'Glasgow Unity Theatre: The Search for a "Scottish People's Theatre"', in *New Edinburgh Review*, 40 (February 1978), p. 30 and p. 31, note 2.

²⁶ N. Thomson, 'Native Drama', in *Scots Theatre*, 2 (October 1946), p. 7.

²⁷ 'Stands Scottish Drama Where It Did?', [anonymous], in *Scots Theatre*, 3 (November 1946), p. 4.

²⁸ Robert Mitchell interviewed by Jack Mitchell in London in 1967. Tape recording held in the Scottish Theatre Archive, STA Tape 60.

²⁹ *The Scotsman*, 28 August 1947, p. 4.

³⁰ John Hill, 'Towards a "Scottish People's Theatre"', in *Theatre Quarterly*, 7:27 (Autumn 1977), p. 66. He also discusses, on p.65, the company's preference for the designations 'part-time' and 'full-time'.

³¹ David Hutchison, 'Roddy McMillan and the Scottish Theatre', in *Cencrastus*, 2 (Spring 1980), p.6.

³² See the newspaper feature on Ida Anderson, who graduated from the Edinburgh School of Speech Training and Dramatic Art in 1939, and joined the staff of the Edinburgh College of Speech and Drama in 1950: Lynn Cochrane, 'On course for stardom', in *The Scotsman*, 21 January 1999, p. 14. It is relevant to mention, too, that, according to A. B. Paterson, the founder of the Byre Theatre, the Byre Play Club financed one of its members, Russell Mather, to attend the Edinburgh School of Speech Training and Dramatic Art from 1937-39 'on the understanding that at weekends he passed on to the members what he had learned during the week'. Quoted in Donald Campbell, *Playing for Scotland*, p. 121. The full quotation refers imprecisely to his attendance at 'the Edinburgh Drama College', which Ida Anderson has kindly elucidated as being the Edinburgh School of Speech Training and Dramatic Art, for she studied there alongside Russell Mather during 1937-39.

³³ John Hill, 'Towards a "Scottish People's Theatre"', in *Theatre Quarterly*, 7:27 (Autumn 1977), p. 65.

³⁴ John Hill, 'Towards a "Scottish People's Theatre"', in *Theatre Quarterly*, 7:27 (Autumn 1977), p. 65. Hill also notes there that contributory to Glasgow Unity's decision to form a professional company 'was the feeling that the Citizens Theatre was not fulfilling its role as a native theatre' (p. 65).

³⁵ Winifred Bannister, *James Bridie and His Theatre: A study of James Bridie's personality, his stage plays and his work for the foundation of a Scottish National Theatre* (London: Rockliff, 1955), pp.192-3. It is relevant to note in this context that Eddie Boyd, like Roddy McMillan a member of Glasgow Unity, wrote in his introduction to McMillan's play *All in Good Faith* (Glasgow: Scottish Society of Playwrights, 1979): 'The greatest formative

influence on Roddy McMillan was, undoubtedly, Glasgow Unity Theatre as, indeed, it was on all of us who shared that experience. [...] McMillan never lost his faith in the ultimate emergence of a genuinely Scottish theatre. He saw, at close quarters the colonial exploitation of the theatrical scene up here by English directors for whom Scotland was simply a campaign medal, a way station on the journey to something bigger - and by inference - better.' (n.p.).

^{36.} By playwrights such as Vishnevsky, Lope de Vega, and Ibsen. See the list 'Plays produced by Glasgow Unity Theatre' in *Souvenir Brochure: Glasgow Unity Theatre: [Edinburgh] International Arts Festival: Season August-September, 1947*, p. 12.

^{37.} Robert Mitchell, 'Foundations of a Scots Theatre Tradition', in *Scots Theatre*, 1 (September 1946), p.3.

^{38.} *Souvenir Brochure: Glasgow Unity Theatre: [Edinburgh] International Arts Festival: Season August-September 1947*, p. 2.

^{39.} Colin Chambers, *The Story of Unity Theatre* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989), p. 282.

^{40.} Glasgow Unity's pioneering approach in this regard laid the foundations for what became a tradition of urban realism in modern Scottish drama that continues down to today. See Randall Stevenson, 'In the Jungle of the Cities', in *Scottish Theatre Since the Seventies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), pp. 100-11.

^{41.} Robert Mitchell, 'Foundations of a Scots Theatre Tradition', in *Scots Theatre*, 1 (September 1946), p.10.

^{42.} John Hill, 'Glasgow Unity Theatre: The Search for a "Scottish People's Theatre"', in *New Edinburgh Review*, 40 (February 1978), p. 30.

^{43.} British Library reference: LCP 1945/10 (Add 67388), *The Lower Depths*, 1945, pp. 1-49. Subsequent references within the text are to this typescript.

^{44.} Audrey Bain, 'Striking It Rich?', in *Theatre Scotland*, 3:11 (Autumn 1994), p. 20.

^{45.} Colin Chambers, *The Story of Unity Theatre* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989), p. 282.

^{46.} Introduction to *The Gorbals Story* (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications, 1985), p. 9.

^{47.} Alasdair Cameron, *Study Guide to Twentieth-Century Scottish Drama* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow, Department of Scottish Literature, 1990), p. 81.

^{48.} John Hill, 'Towards a "Scottish People's Theatre"', in *Theatre Quarterly*, 7:27 (Autumn 1977), p. 66.

^{49.} Reported by Professor Ian Brown, Faculty of Arts, Queen Margaret University College, Edinburgh, who interviewed Russell Hunter and Ida Schuster on 16 September 2000.

^{50.} The edition concerned may have been *Seven Plays of Maxim Gorky*, translated by

Alexander Bakshy, in collaboration with Paul S. Nathan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1945), which includes *The Lower Depths* at pp. 13-70. A comparison of the passage of Mitchell's version cited in the discussion (from his pp. 47-8) with Bakshy's translation (p. 67) confirms, in certain resemblances, the strong likelihood that Mitchell did base his version on Bakshy. However, offering a detailed comparison of the Mitchell and Bakshy versions falls outwith the scope of this article, as such a comparison casts little light on the primary question of the Scottishness of Mitchell's adaptation and the wider issues associated with this.

⁵¹ An enthusiastic review in *Tribune* of *The Lower Depths* when it played in Edinburgh stated that Glasgow Unity 'presented a Scottish adaptation [...] in a perfect realistic style with no pursuit of a supposedly Russian "atmosphere"' (quoted in John Hill, 'Towards a "Scottish People's Theatre"', in *Theatre Quarterly*, 7:27 (Autumn 1977), p. 68). This can be understood to mean not that the setting was changed but that the company eschewed a more mannered and actorly approach in favour of a naturalism that drew on a Glaswegian reality in speech and gesture, as has been noted in other reviews cited in this present article.

⁵² Cordelia Oliver, 'The Long March Towards a Scottish National Theatre', in *Scottish Theatre News*, 49 (Spring 1986), p. 29.

⁵³ *The Scotsman*, 28 August 1947, p. 4.

⁵⁴ *The Glasgow Herald*, 2 September 1947, p. 2.

⁵⁵ *The Scotsman*, 12 August 1947, p. 3.

⁵⁶ N. Thomson, 'Native Drama', in *Scots Theatre*, 2 (October 1946), p. 7.