

John McGrath: an Updated Checklist and Bibliography

by Ksenija Horvat and John McGrath

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

John Peter McGrath was born on 1 June 1935 in Cheshire, England into an Irish Catholic family. In the early days of World War II, in 1939, after his father had been called up to the RAF, his mother took him and his younger brother, who was only three weeks old, to Buckley, North Wales. McGrath recalled the ex-mining village and his school days at Mold Alun Grammar School, Flintshire: 'I had some fantastic teachers. They whisked me through everything and I did my O-Levels at thirteen'. [1](#)

The family remained in Buckley until 1951, when they returned to Cheshire where McGrath worked in a steam laundry and on a farm. From 1953 to 1955 he served in the British Army as, progressively, a gunner, bombardier and artillery officer. During his service, he was stationed in Germany, Egypt, Jordan, Malta and Tripoli. He said about his two years of National Service that it was 'the most extraordinary experience', [2](#) on which he drew later for his plays. After demobilisation, he studied English at St. John's College, Oxford University, where he graduated in 1958, and took a Diploma in Education in 1959.

At university, McGrath actively participated in the work of the student Experimental Theatre Club and the Oxford University Drama Society, directing shows, such as Aristophanes' *The Birds* in a garden in Christ Church College in summer 1959. His work was cited in Humphrey Carpenter's *OUDES: a Centenary History of the Oxford University Dramatic Society 1885-1985* (1985) as exceptionally talented. Amongst his own plays that were produced at Oxford two have often been mentioned as illustrative of the first phase of his literary output. The first of the plays in question is *A Man Has Two Fathers*, about a young man torn between a tramp and a wealthy man as father figures, which was staged by the University Dramatic Society in 1958. The second play is *Why the Chicken*, which depicts a struggle between a female social worker and a gang of working-class youngsters, and which was presented by Oxford Theatre Group in 1959. In 1958 he met a fellow student, Elizabeth MacLennan, at an improvisation workshop. He later cast her as Molly Bloom in his production of Joyce's *Ulysses* which had been modified by the Lord Chamberlain. They married in 1962 and have a daughter and two sons.

In 1958, John McGrath accepted an invitation from George Devine to London to write something for the Royal Court Theatre. After the commercial and critical success of *The Tent* in 1958, McGrath's play *Why the Chicken* was produced by Lionel Bart in 1960. After its commercial failure, McGrath briefly turned from theatre to television. For the following five years he worked for the BBC as a writer/director of various series and arts programmes. Amongst other projects, he wrote for, and was the founding director of, *Z-Cars*, the famous police series that started in 1962. He finally returned to the stage in 1965 when he wrote *Events while Guarding the Bofors Gun*, often considered his first major stage play, which was based on his own experience of the life in the army, and his critique of postwar British imperialism.

In the late 1960s McGrath began writing screenplays for Hollywood. His output included *Billion Dollar Brain* (1967), *The Bofors Gun* (1968), *The Virgin Soldiers* (1969), and *The Reckoning* (1970). At approximately the same time, he also became active in the radical socialist movement. In 1968 he went to Paris to take part in the May *événements*. McGrath has always been politically aware. This political awareness may be seen in his theatrical method: he has always been eclectic in his choice of

styles, ranging from pantomime or popular theatre techniques and ceilidh, all imbued by gritty political humour, on the one hand, to highly literate, even surreal, experiments on the other. Baz Kershaw observes that:

McGrath [drew] on the techniques of popular theater genres, stand-up comedy, working-class club entertainments and a medley of musical forms (rock, folk, country and western, and pop) to create an original aesthetic that was recognizably 'Scottish' but at the same time tuned in to global political history.³

McGrath himself has said in interview with Raymond Ross⁴ that, theatrically, he learnt much more from John Arden and Joan Littlewood than from Brecht. He has always remained open to a variety of external stimuli, and, in this sense, it is very probable that the time spent in Paris and the events that he experienced there may have radically influenced his writing in the 1970s. His theatrical vision has always been openly coloured by Marxist thinking, and he has shown throughout his rich writing career, in Joyce McMillan's words, 'a committed socialist view of the relationship between life and art, theatre and politics, culture and class [...]',⁵ for which he has been described as 'Mr Left Wing Theatre'⁶ in Britain.

In the early 1970s, he cooperated closely with Alan Dossier of Liverpool Everyman Theatre, on the shaping of community-style theatre that would attract working-class audiences, rather than exclude them 'on grounds of education, wealth and class'.⁷ Out of his collaboration with Everyman Theatre came productions such as *Hover Through the Fog* (1969), *Unruly Elements* (1971), *Soft or a Girl* (1971) and *The Fish in the Sea* (1972), as well as the adaptations of Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1972) and Terson's *Prisoners of the War* (1972).

While working on his play *Trees in the Wind*, McGrath created the first 7:84 Theatre Company which premièred the play at the Cranston Street Hall in Edinburgh on 25 August 1971. Receiving a small grant from the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) and much moral and material support from all those involved in the project, the company toured England, Scotland and Wales. McGrath described how many people involved in the project worked without compensation, or even put in their own funds, whilst working on 'less than subsistence wages'.⁸ The company was named after a statistic published in *The Economist* in 1966, according to which seven percent of the population of Britain owned eighty-four percent of its wealth. The name of the company was emblematic of its opposition to such inequality and of its mission, creating theatre about and for a working-class audience. McGrath firmly believed that there was, indeed, 'a working class audience for theatre in Britain which [made] demands, and which [had] values, which [were] different from those enshrined in our idealized middle-class audience'.⁹ In the following two years 7:84 Theatre Company toured productions of plays by Trevor Griffiths, John Arden, Margaretta D'Arcy, Adrian Mitchell and John McGrath's *Plugged-In to History*, *Underneath* and *Serjeant Musgrave Dances On*. For most of 1972, the bulk of the company's work was organised from McGrath's home on an equal profit share basis. He worked for no wages at all most of the time. In the first year alone, despite grave financial difficulties, 7:84 collaborated with an impressive number of theatre practitioners including Victor Henry, Elizabeth MacLennan, Gillian Hanna, Feri Lean, David MacLennan, Sandy Craig, Gavin Richards, Tony Haygarth, Stephen Rea and Roger Sloman, amongst many others, and, besides McGrath, the shows were directed by renowned directors of the like of Richard Eyre, Alan Dossier, and Pam Brighton.

At the end of 1972, after intense debate and a lot of encouragement from both McGrath and Elizabeth MacLennan, Gavin Richards left in early 1973 to start his own company, Belt and Braces Road Show. The rest of the company divided into two: most of the members remained in London

creating the basis for 7:84 (England), while McGrath, David MacLennan, Feri Lean and Elizabeth MacLennan went north to establish what became 7:84 (Scotland).

This was the beginning of a second period of McGrath's creative work, which lasted until 1989. While maintaining his work with what was now 7:84 (England), he also worked with the Scottish company, whose initial intention was to create plays that would tour village halls in the remotest areas of the Scottish Highlands and reach an audience who had never before had a chance to experience theatre. 7:84 (Scotland)'s first show of this kind was *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*, which Joyce McMillan has called a 'brilliant ceilidh of rage and laughter against the exploitation of land and people'. [10](#) The play was launched at a 1973 conference in Edinburgh on the future of Scotland, followed by a tour of twenty-eight village and small town venues in the north of Scotland, the Hebrides, and the Orkneys. Later that year the production returned for a second tour of the Highlands, before travelling to Ireland. It was subsequently broadcast on BBC 'Play for Today' programme in 1974, and again in 1975. Since then, it has been shown on TV in Norway, Sweden, New Zealand and Australia, and became known as one of the greatest British post-war political plays. Its reputation ensured the position of 7:84 Theatre Company (Scotland) as one of the leading political theatre companies both at home and abroad. MacMillan referred to this in 1996:

Twenty-three years on, the tour of *The Cheviot* is still mentioned as a crucial moment in defining the modern consciousness of the Highlands and Islands; and for fifteen years after that tour, it was possible to trace the impact of the radical style adopted by McGrath's 7:84 Company - and expounded in his brilliant 1980 book of lectures, *A Good Night Out* - on dozens of young Fringe companies'. [11](#)

Following their success in the Highlands 7:84 decided to try to reach working-class audiences in the industrial areas of Scotland. So, plays written by McGrath in the 1970s dealt with the history and continuation of socialism in Scotland, and the position of women in Scottish society. An example of the former is *The Game's a Bogey* (1974), a play about John McLean, the Red Clydesider, and the latter is exemplified by *Little Red Hen* (1975), which deals with two generations of socialist women. McGrath continued writing about the latter theme in his 1980's plays such as *Blood Red Roses* (1980), *Swings and Roundabouts* (1980), *Women in Power* (1983), an adaptation of Aristophanes' *Assembly of Women*, *The Baby and the Bathwater* (1984), and *Mairi Mhor: Woman of Skye* (1987). The latter dealt with the life of the well-known nineteenth-century Gaelic song-maker and land campaigner, and was later produced as a film version, and broadcast on BBC2 TV in 1995.

In March 1975, 7:84 Theatre Company (England) received annual funding from the ACGB. As a consequence, a company of six actors and four musicians was formed who produced such McGrath shows as *Lay Off* (1975), about the rise of multinational companies, *Yobbo Nowt* (1975), inspired by Bertolt Brecht's *The Mother*, and *Big Square Fields* (1979), about the effects of the Industrial Revolution on farming communities. The other plays produced by this company included *The Rat Trap* (1976), *Trembling Giant* (1977), *The Life and Times of Joe England* (1977), *Bitter Apples* (1979), *Nightclass* (1981) and *Rejoice!* (1982). With these shows the company toured Britain and abroad. They played in occupied factories, town halls, Communist Party rallies, Socialist Worker Party branches, and theatre spaces in London, Glasgow, Amsterdam, Manchester, South Wales, and elsewhere. At the same time as 7:84 Theatre Company (England) secured an Arts Council grant, the Scottish company also succeeded in obtaining funding from the Scottish Arts Council and presented McGrath's musical, mentioned above, *Little Red Hen* (1975).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, John McGrath continued to be artistic director and principal writer of both 7:84 companies and he also collaborated with several other theatre companies at home and abroad, such as the Mickery Theatre in Amsterdam. He fought ideological battles with other leftist

writers such as David Edgar and David Hare, who strongly disagreed with his use of popular forms in theatre. In 1979, at the Scottish Assembly referendum, a majority vote for an Assembly was blocked by a clause sponsored by a North London M.P. of Scottish origin. In reaction, 7:84 Theatre Company (Scotland) presented *Joe's Drum*, a play about popular protest against injustice, which itself became popular with audiences. The Company continued to fill theatre venues in Central Scotland with productions such as *Swings and Roundabouts* (1980) and *Blood Red Roses* (1980). They continued to produce in this fashion until 1988, when, having lost what he considered a key battle with the Scottish Arts Council to strengthen his company's political edge, John McGrath was forced to resign. The company's new artistic director, David Hayman, refused his proposal for a promenade performance of a large-scale history play in Glasgow, *Border Warfare*.

The break with 7:84 marked the beginning of a third phase in McGrath's writing, marked by the production of plays such as *Border Warfare* in 1989 and *John Brown's Body* in 1990. *Border Warfare* was first staged as a play about 'historic and political borderlines between Scotland and England', [12](#) and was later produced by Wildcat and McGrath's Freeway Films as three one-hour episodes for television. Both *Border Warfare* and *John Brown's Body* drew strongly on McGrath's fascination with the carnivalesque tradition and popular theatre in order to explore current political themes. McGrath also continued to explore the borders of humanity. In his 1994 production of *Reading Rigoberta*, produced by Freeway Films and presented at Theatre Workshop in Edinburgh on 19 August 1994, McGrath directed his wife Elizabeth MacLennan in a powerful one-woman play about the life of the Nobel prize winner, Rigoberta Menchu, whose family had been victims of dictatorial brutality in Guatemala. Catherine Lockerbie described McGrath's direction as 'scenes out of Hieronymus Bosch's worst visions of eternal torment: living human beings flayed, mutilated, set ablaze as their mothers watch'. [13](#)

During the 1990s, McGrath often collaborated with Wildcat Theatre Company, a 1977 offshoot of 7:84 Theatre Company (Scotland), creating plays on an epic scale, and basing his formal experiments on the work of directors such as Ariane Mnouchkine and Luca Ronconi. In 1994, for example, Wildcat staged McGrath's adaptation of Neil Gunn's folk epic, *The Silver Darlings*, directed by John Bett. After seeing it at the King's Theatre in Edinburgh in September 1994, Colin Donald referred to its epic scale, calling McGrath's stage adaptation 'a grand theatrical event' and 'a labour of love':

[a]ttractive young hero, mythic rite-of-passage structure, strong family reconciliation themes, massive elemental symbols. Written in the 1930s, when optimism must have been difficult, the novel stands as a great act of faith in Scotland's future, rooted in an understanding of man and women in the landscape, and a deep knowledge of life in the Highlands since time immemorial. [14](#)

Amongst his other collaborations with Wildcat are *Ane Satire of the Four Estates* (1996), inspired by Sir David Lindsay's classic play, and *The Last of the MacEachans* (1997). The former was directed by McGrath and presented, in the form of a political pantomime, as part of the Edinburgh International Festival programme. It played at the Edinburgh International Conference Centre, a non-traditional venue for theatre, in August 1996. The play was occasionally ridiculed as left-wing and crude. *The Times*, for example, dismissed it as 'a silly, coarse and imaginatively monotonous spin-off', [15](#) *The Daily Telegraph* concluded that it was 'crude, predictable and awesomely unfunny', [16](#) whilst *The Sunday Times* accused it of being 'full of noise and shallow cliches'. [17](#) To this Colin Donald had only one comment in his review of Wildcat's production, 'So it worked then,' and went on to explain that:

McGrath and Wildcat set out to produce a piece of theatre that was popular (meaning that a lot of people would come to see it), that got under the skin of

its targets, and that undermined the soporific patterns of discourse between the Festival, its audiences and those fruitful specimens for behavioural scientists and sociologists known as "the critics". [18](#)

In 1997, Freeway followed up by presenting *The Last of the MacEachans*, a revival of McGrath's 1996 'much admired elegy for the old Highlands'. [19](#) It featured Elizabeth MacLennan, in a performance which Colin Donald described in his review as 'full of wicked charm and acute observation'. [20](#)

These productions clearly showed that McGrath had steadily and uncompromisingly continued to create the kind of 'people's theatre' that the early 7:84 Companies had become known for. He also remained true to his early mission to entertain and educate his audiences in terms of the political history of Scotland, when he accepted TAG's invitation in 1997 to write a play that would celebrate the centenary of the trades union movement in Scotland. He explained his decision by suggesting that he was 'attracted by TAG's ability to switch between the high-profile events on big platforms, and its ability to take over school halls and create theatre out of nothing'.] [21](#) The play, *Worksong*, toured Scottish schools in September 1997, and, according to James Brining, TAG's artistic director, working with McGrath was a valuable experience:

The play certainly stretches us; you've got all these complex historical facts to express in terms that have to have emotional impact. We want the kids not just to join in with the songs, but to take part in the whole process of the play; it's about the difference between principle versus pragmatism. Obviously John takes a line, but the play keeps things open to discussion. It's quite provocative, but there's nothing wrong with that. It's got the grit that every good oyster needs. [22](#)

McGrath strongly believes that people are still interested in political theatre. He feels that 'they are starved of this kind of theatre, and they seize any chance they get to see it'. [23](#) Therefore, despite financial and health crises that have plagued him throughout the last decade, his intention is to create thought-provoking, daring pieces for as long as there is audience interested enough to listen to his ideas. Besides playwriting, McGrath also continues to work in the film industry, producing, with his film company Freeway Films, such renowned features as *Carrington* (1995) and *Ma Vie en Rose* (1997). Hailed, and sometimes scorned, both in Scotland and south of the border, for his radical socialist concepts and dedication to a popular theatre ingrained in a community experience, he remains one of the most innovative and vibrant playwrights and theatre practitioners in contemporary Scotland.

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