

Sarah (Sadie) Ross Aitken, M. B. E.: A Study of a Career in Theatre

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Introduction

Scottish theatre history was made when, in 1944, the Church of Scotland accepted the gift of the Gateway in Elm Row, Edinburgh and announced the intention of running it with Sadie Aitken as manager. Few women in Britain had held such a position and each of them, apart from Lilian Baylis, had had a stage career. In addition to being the first woman to hold the licence of a Scottish theatre, Sadie was the second woman in Edinburgh to hold a cinema licence. Her career had been in social work until she moved to the Gateway and today those familiar with her name usually only know of her involvement in Scottish theatre from her time at the Gateway Theatre.

It is significant that there is little literature relating to Sadie's life in the theatre which can be reviewed. David Hutchison¹ discussed the sudden, enormous expansion in amateur drama between the end of the First World War and the beginning of the Second World War and it was in this area that Sadie began her theatrical career. The British Drama League Journal, *War-Time Drama*² carried a report of Sadie's position of Secretary at the popular Scottish Community Drama Association's St. Andrews Summer School of Drama in 1942, but gave no indication of what that position would entail. Owen Dudley Edwards³ in his discussion on the place of the Edinburgh Festival in Scottish theatre briefly acknowledged Sadie's responsibility for the Assembly Hall becoming a major venue in the Edinburgh Festival. Albert Mackie⁴ mentioned her management role at the Gateway and her involvement with Scottish Community Drama while Robert Kemp⁵ and Moultrie Kelsall⁶ paid tribute to her skills as Gateway manager. Donald Campbell⁷ gave a more detailed outline of her career, including her acting roles, and paid tribute to her organisational and administrative skills in the Scottish theatre, but, to date, no-one appears to have investigated Sadie's enthusiasm and ability to involve the younger and more socially remote members of the community in the world of drama. An article in *War-Time Drama* (1945) praised the work of the producers in the Drama Festival organised by the Edinburgh Association of Girls' Clubs and the Union of Boys' Clubs and Sadie was one of those producers. However no literature in the way of written biographies appears to exist. Information, therefore, has been gleaned from theatre programmes, minute books, press cuttings, oral testimonies and private correspondence.

Education and a Start in Theatre

Sarah (Sadie) Ross Aitken was born on July 15, 1905, St Swithin's Day, in Belhaven in Dunbar. She believed herself to have been born with a sense of the dramatic and recalled in a radio tribute (B.B.C., May 1980) that before she was old enough to have learned the calendar she would tell people that she had been born on the Bass Rock and was 'rowed over on a dark and stormy night'. Her father, William, was a grocer's manager from Peebles and her mother Lily was from Birse near Aberdeen.

The family moved to Edinburgh and by 1912 were living in 19 Perth St., the Aitken children attending Stockbridge Primary School in Hamilton Place. Sadie had one sister, Alma, and two brothers, Willie, later to become the last Chief General Manager of The Edinburgh Savings Bank, and Jim, who became the Chief Architect for Northern Ireland.

Mima Johnstone,⁸ a year younger than Sadie, shared some classes in primary school. Poetry was an important part of the curriculum and at age ninety-one Mima was still word perfect in the poems

and songs that she had been taught. Sadie too had a great love of poetry which lasted throughout her life. Ida Anderson,⁹ a member of the Teachers of Speech and Drama Association, recalled that, on 23 October 1983, Sadie became an Honorary Member, a position she held until her death, and that from 1938 Sadie was also

a very regular member at the poetry group in Edinburgh...
the Scottish Association For the Speaking of Verse... now
PASS, the Poetry Association of Scotland.¹⁰

Children's choice of secondary school depended on their career plans. Sadie enrolled at Broughton Secondary School, which, according to Stewart, writing in 1925, provided 'absolutely free secondary education in all the cultural subjects'.¹¹ Pupils' ages ranged from 12 to 20 years and the school was intended

for pupils who are prepared to take a Full Secondary Course
of at least five years duration. The instruction ... is, in the main,
intended for those who propose to enter a profession.¹²

After five years study, pupils were awarded the full Scottish Education Department Leaving Certificate, which comprised a minimum of 2 Highers and 2 Lowers and qualified them to enter University. Sadie began her profession by working for five years in an Edinburgh law office, which research has been unable to identify.¹³

Kay Inglis, stage manager at the Gateway,¹⁴ remembered Sadie telling her that it was taking part in a pageant in Craigmillar that really fired her enthusiasm for acting. Research has found that on 14, 15 and 16 of July 1927, a 'Historical Pageant' was held on the lands of Craigmillar Castle to raise funds for The Scottish Branch of the Queen Victoria's Jubilee Institute for Nurses.¹⁵ The King and Queen attended the first performance. Each performer was in costume and Sadie, then twenty-two years old, sang in one of the choirs as a soprano. The Queen's Nurses, as they were commonly known, were a lifeline to many in the poorest areas of Edinburgh where few could afford to pay for the services of a doctor. They worked alongside the Home Board, the Social Work department of the Church of Scotland, which had 62 missionary assistants working among families in the poorest city districts. A Church of Scotland booklet (1938) describes their work:

The Home Board works among families and has 124 Church Sisters
who visit homes, advising, solving domestic problems, making friends
with children, wisely counselling girls reaching out for freedom and
caring for the sick and aged.¹⁶

The Church of Scotland and the Scottish Community Drama Association

In 1927, Sadie left her job in the law office and began her administration career with Christian Life and Work, which subsequently became part of the Social Services section of the Church of Scotland. She did not however forsake the Church Drama Society and, realising the need for the co-ordination of such drama groups, became involved with the small group of people who organised the Church Drama Federation. In an article for the 1976 Golden Jubilee edition of *Scene*, the Scottish Community Drama Association (S.C.D.A.) magazine, Sadie recalled that the Church Drama Federation had been successful, but, around 1928, she became aware of the S.C.D.A., which had been inaugurated two years previously, and (research has been unable to establish why) was invited to become the first Edinburgh District Secretary. She was interested in the social purpose of drama

and, inspired by the plans for drama schools, libraries and conferences, the Church Drama Federation was quickly dissolved.

The main venue for S.C.D.A. productions was in the Pleasance, one of Edinburgh's worst slum areas, described by Charles McKean as comprising 'substandard and overcrowded tenements'.¹⁷ Felicity Ivory explained that in 1913 Lord Polwarth, James Ivory and Dr. Barbour had purchased the premises of Fulton's Brewery, situated in the Pleasance, and set up the Pleasance Trust, the aim of which was to 'promote the social advancement of the Pleasance District and extend the social and mission work'¹⁸ of Dr Harry Millar who was at that time minister of the Pleasance and Warden of New College Settlement. Extensive renovations, after storm damage in 1925, provided accommodation for a play hall, terraces, a Violet Ray and Massage building and a gymnasium but there was a need for an area to stage entertainments and in 1928 an appeal was launched to pay for a theatre. The Little Theatre, where the S.C.D.A. appeared, was designed by J. Inch Morrison and built in 1928 as an expansion of the Pleasance Centre. The Church of Scotland's *National Theatre Resource Submission* described the work done in the Little Theatre as 'professional theatre...built from the bottom up on a community base'.¹⁹ The Pleasance buildings still remain, having been sold to Edinburgh University for £100,000 in 1977.

Sadie, being, according to Adams, 'a keen young actor'²⁰, frequently worked for Robert Fenemore's Masque Theatre, a repertory company, founded in 1928, which had an annual season in the Lyceum for five years and employed local amateurs to play small parts. In 1928 Sadie had a small part in which, according to Donald Campbell, she had only one line ('I feel sick') but she milked it and 'said it differently every single night'.²¹

Allen Wright, the Scotsman theatre critic, reporting on Sadie's appearance as Mrs Possett in Clive Perry's 1968 production of *Rookery Nook* at the Edinburgh Lyceum, recalled that she had played the same part in the Fraser Neal Players production of *Rookery Nook* at the Music Hall in Edinburgh in 1938. According to Reg Laing,²² husband of Ella Neal, Sadie often toured with the Fraser Neal Players and, in a photograph which is in possession of Mr Laing, Sadie is seen standing on the step of the lorry as they set off on tour around 1934.

Fraser Neal was a member of the Masque Theatre Company and he and his sister Ella became great friends of Sadie. He became interested in costume and scenic design and in 1932 he bought the wig-making firm of William Mutrie transforming it into the largest theatrical costumiers outside London. He went on to form his own touring theatre company, the Fraser Neal Players, which performed in most of the seaside resorts on the west coast of Scotland and Sadie performed with them.

Fraser Neal helped many famous names to get started in show business and, in 1945, sixteen-year old Jimmy Logan played Pekoe in Neal's production of *Aladdin* in the Gaiety at Leith. According to Logan,²³ on Sunday evenings Fraser Neal hosted wonderful dinners in his flat in the Dean Village, when he was not working, and around the enormous coal fire a great deal of theatrical networking took place. Logan said that Sadie was a regular at these dinners and it was there that she and Logan first met.

John Cairney who toured with the company in the early 1950s described the experience of touring towns such as Paisley and Greenock as 'jaded professionals... and green hopefuls like myself ... playing second-rate theatres with third-rate plays'.²⁴ However, Jimmy Logan believes that Cairney was looking back from a 'height in the clouds'²⁵ and that he was most probably delighted to have got the job at the time. He remembers celebrating V.E. Day in Edinburgh while appearing in Fraser Neal's Palladium production of *Jeannie Deans* in 1945, and feels theatre companies of that calibre

are sadly missed today because they allowed 'the John Cairneys of the world to make mistakes and not make them in the number one theatres'.²⁶

Before the war however, acting and the theatre were still part-time for Sadie, as she continued her career in social work, but she was a regular student at the annual S.C.D.A. Summer Schools, held mostly in St. Andrews, where qualified professionals in the theatre shared their expertise. She described herself as 'an enthusiastic Secretary'²⁷ of the S.C.D.A. but her enthusiasm and audacity were almost her undoing when, in 1933 and, according to her, entirely without approval, she not only invited the British Drama League to hold the annual conference in Edinburgh, but also invited Bernard Shaw as guest speaker. She told him that she had arranged for William Maxwell, his publisher, 'to provide hospitality'.²⁸ When the reply to both requests was positive, the plans for the Edinburgh conference, in a two hundred seat hall which was already booked, were thrown to the wind. Instead the Assembly Hall, which seated almost two thousand, was booked and the general public invited to attend the Saturday afternoon session. S.I. Hsiung, the Chinese author of *Lady Precious Stream*, was also a speaker at that conference and, on a visit to Scott country, Sadie introduced him to her cure for all ills, whisky.

The financial slump of 1931 heralded a phenomenal increase in amateur dramatic clubs as the unemployed, who had previously made up theatre audiences, formed drama clubs and began to produce their own theatre. An example of this is described by Eleanor Elder²⁹ in her history of the Arts League of Service Travelling Players, who between 1919 and 1937 performed in remote villages:

by 1937 we were no longer welcome in the villages of Scotland, as entertainment in these places had become a do-it-yourself occupation.³⁰

One-act social realism plays, such as those written by Joe Corrie for the Bowhill Players in Fife, were very popular with amateur companies. According to Jack House, who wrote a weekly column on amateur drama in the *Evening Citizen*, by 1932,

amateur drama was the 'in' thing and every daily and evening newspaper in Scotland ran a column and carried criticisms, night after night, of amateur dramatic shows...a drama festival in those days had all the attributes of a football league...every team had its supporters and although they didn't wave banners nor invade the stage...they did make their presence felt.³¹

By 1934, the continuing recession had contributed to industrial areas becoming heavily involved in amateur drama and, in August of that year, the S.C.D.A. was asked for help in developing drama work in clubs for the unemployed which were springing up around the country. Although enthusiastic about this, Sadie was also keen to replace the one act play festivals with full-length play festivals. She was concerned that the S.C.D.A. festivals had not expanded in any way since their inauguration in 1926 and is quoted in the S.C.D.A. minute books as saying 'The Association must progress'.³² She felt that full-length plays would raise the standard of acting and production and also that 'the full-length play is infinitely more interesting to an audience'.³³

At the S.C.D.A. 1935 annual conference in Perth, which coincided with the reopening of Perth Theatre, now as a repertory theatre, she moved a resolution on the move from one act to full-length play festivals. This was carried unanimously but, as she recalled in *Scene* 'the Council found the practical difficulties insurmountable'³⁴ thus preventing an implementation of this change. Nothing daunted and to prove her point, in 1936 the Edinburgh District held a profit-making week-long

festival of full-length plays in the Pleasance Little Theatre. She wrote a full page article ³⁵ on the forthcoming festival beginning:

Amateur drama enthusiasts all over Scotland are awaiting with interest the first full-length play festival organised in this country. ³⁶

Sadie was often frustrated by the lack of imagination she encountered at meetings and conferences and recalled that she was 'bursting with ideas of imaginative progress and would speak out with all the fervour and indignation that only youth is capable of expressing'.³⁷

She became Secretary of the South East Division of the S.C.D.A. in June 1937 (S.C.D.A. minute books) and in November it was proposed that the full length play festival be held in the Empire Exhibition in Bellahouston Park, Glasgow, in May of 1938. The Home Board of the Church of Scotland, Sadie's employer, however had proposed that a Church and three hundred seat Pavilion be built in the centre of the exhibition to show that spiritual values are central to human life and progress. Within the Pavilion aspects of the church's activities in 'the social and moral work with young and old' ³⁸ were to be displayed with the intention of drawing awareness to the 'silent unseen realities'³⁹ of God's presence amidst the noise and bustle of the drama unfolding in the Park.

James Bridie believed that the exhibition 'would give a very poor idea of the main cultural activities of Scotland'⁴⁰ if community drama was not represented, but felt that 'a company of professional, mostly Scottish actors under a Scottish director should be engaged for the duration of the season'.⁴¹ In the event the S.C.D.A. staged their festival in the Theatre Royal in Glasgow and House reported that 'the much despised church clubs may represent drama to the visitors, while the clubs which pride themselves on their originality... sit outside'.⁴²

In the years before the war Sadie, still a keen singer, was often employed for the chorus of professional musical productions visiting Edinburgh and she recalled the demanding standards of the chorus master which were tempered by the thrill of receiving a contract at the start of the season.

In addition to her full time job, her work with the S.C.D.A. and appearing in amateur and professional productions, Bill Smith, Session Clerk of Kirk O' Fields Church in Edinburgh, when interviewed by the author, remembered that from about 1936 Sadie was teaching drama and producing plays at the Pleasance Church where his father was a Church Officer. Bill Gardener Scott, who was the Sub-warden of New College, had arranged for her to become involved in drama work at the Church.

Situated on the corner of Arthur Street and the Pleasance, the Church, now demolished, was part of the New College Settlement and was linked to the Little Theatre by a wing of study-bedrooms occupied by senior students of the New College Mission. Although there was a door between the Little Theatre and the Church, Bill recalled that it was kept locked and the boys had no access to the Theatre. The Church had one large hall where the older boys, including Bill, had their activities and a smaller mezzanine hall where Sadie worked with the younger boys. In 1937, younger boys were taking part in Festivals. This work was a forerunner of today's community arts which, according to Lockerbie empowers 'disadvantaged areas [to] start gaining the confidence not to accept quiescently the conditions they find themselves in'.⁴³

Ida Anderson recalled that her late husband, John Anderson, wrote some of the plays performed by the boys and that, after 1939, she had joined Sadie at the Pleasance.

I knew she was very involved there and, it would be after 1939, that I was actually with her on courses that were organised by S.C.D.A. where she was taking a class and I was taking a class.⁴⁴

It was in November 1939⁴⁵ that the National Association of Boys' Clubs appealed for Producers to work voluntarily in clubs throughout the country.

War-Time Activities

Throughout the late thirties and the war years, Drama Festivals were organised by boys' and girls' clubs in Edinburgh and the late Stuart Harris, who was a stage director, remembered Sadie entering a team of little boys from the Pleasance. As they were younger than the minimum age limit of fourteen, they were accepted as a guest team outwith the competition and Harris's memory was that she entered them for two or three consecutive years. The play involved President Lincoln and some society ladies and he described it as

diminutive actors...beautifully dressed and made up, and so excellently trained and produced that once the curtain was up it was hard to believe they were boys, let alone boys from the Pleasance.⁴⁶

Sadie of course knew what adjudicators would look for as she had been appointed to the board of S.C.D.A. adjudicators in 1938. The recognition such an appointment represented may be understood when one reflects that Tyrone Guthrie of the Scottish National Players was also a member. Eddie Kelly played the part of President Lincoln and his outstanding memory of the festival, recalled during a telephone conversation, was of Sadie treating the cast to a sit-in fish tea, complete with bread and butter, in the Marble Arch restaurant in Morrison Street. In a second festival he played the part of Christopher Columbus and Sadie again treated everyone to a fish tea in the Deep Sea restaurant in Leith Walk.

The outbreak of war in 1939 curtailed S.C.D.A. activities, but not Sadie's. In *Scene*,⁴⁷ she described her travels around southern Scotland as an adjudicator at festivals organised by the Young Women's Christian Association (Y.W.C.A.) and the hospitality provided in Y.W.C.A Hostels. She recalled forming a repertory company of SCDA members and, by June 1941, in collaboration with Scottish Command, touring full-length plays to army camps within a 30 mile radius of Edinburgh. Two of her main problems were finding plays that had roles mainly for women and organising transportation to the venues. In February 1942,⁴⁸ the S.C.D.A. received grants from the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (C.E.M.A.) which enabled the Company to continue touring and, despite neither driving or owning a vehicle, Sadie⁴⁹ was allocated petrol coupons, which were rationed, allowing her to keep in contact with the S.C.D.A. districts.

Ida Anderson, who in 1940 had graduated from the Edinburgh College of Speech and Drama, later to become its Director, was a member of the repertory company, and remembers in an interview undergoing security vetting before being ferried to Inchkeith, an island in the Firth of Forth, to entertain the garrison stationed there. The company performed at Turnhouse Airport and also travelled to Peebles Hydro, which was then a military hospital. She recalled that, although most members of the company were trained in drama, they were not then professionals as they were just starting out on their careers. At the invitation of H.Q. Scottish Command, Sadie lectured to women's service units throughout the country and Anderson, accompanied Sadie on 'one or two of these occasions'⁵⁰ and taught Dramatic Movement, Drama and Mime while Sadie taught Voice and Play Production.

In the early war years,⁵¹ Sadie organised the popular St. Andrews summer schools which in 1942 had 120 participants. Anderson recalled in an interview that Sadie was a great friend of Martin Browne and Henzie Raeburn (husband and wife) of the Pilgrim Players, who 'were in residence for the duration of the School'.⁵² Browne, who was the Director of the Religious Drama Society, wrote in *War-Time Drama*:

From the middle of November I shall be ready, with a company of six professional players, to offer dramatic entertainment with a Christian theme to all who want it...Among us will be some who can help teachers to start their own productions or take classes with children or adults, and we should like to make visits for this purpose apart from shows.
⁵³

Actors in the Pilgrim Players⁵⁴ were paid the same rate as a private soldier and received their board and lodgings.

Meanwhile, the British Drama League (B.D.L.)⁵⁵ were involved in consultations with the Prime Minister, the President of the Board of Education and C.E.M.A. regarding the Civic Theatre Scheme. Sadie was concerned that developments were taking place in Scotland in which the S.C.D.A. had no part. Dr. O.H. Mavor, who wrote as James Bridie, was Chairman of the C.E.M.A. Scottish Committee, and, when he visited the S.C.D.A. Summer School in July 1943, Sadie asked him what part C.E.M.A. would allow S.C.D.A. to play in the development of theatre in Scotland and whether S.C.D.A. could have a representative on C.E.M.A. Central Committee. The reply came in September, signed as James Bridie, that S.C.D.A. could not be on C.E.M.A. as the rules were that no member of the Committee represented any other body, a rule which is still Arts Council practice.

Throughout the war Sadie had also to find time for fire-watching duties which she described as 'a rather dreary business'⁵⁶ so, from 1943, she would turn up for her watch, sign the book to prove she had arrived and then about turn and catch a train to Glasgow to see a production at the Citizens' Theatre. On her return to Edinburgh, on the last train, she rejoined her fellow fire-watchers and it was while she was on rota with the late George Mercer Robertson, the Solicitor of the Church, that he said to her 'You will be interested in this gift that has just been made to the Home Board'.⁵⁷

The Gateway Theatre and the Gateway Company

In 1944, Mr. Anderson, an Edinburgh tradesman, gifted the Elm Row Centre to the Home Board of the Church of Scotland requesting that the Church create:

A social and recreational centre, especially for young people,
with emphasis on Films and Drama experiments.⁵⁸

The buildings housed not only the theatre cum cinema; it was home to a neighbourhood club, a toddler's group and a mixed youth club. The Rev. George Candlish was appointed warden of the Centre and Sadie remembered that he

came to ask me something about the Theatre aspect of it...
then a week or two later he came back and said 'Would you
be interested yourself?'.⁵⁹

After being reassured that transfer from Social Services to the Home Board would not be considered a break in her service, she had no hesitation in accepting the job. According to Sadie the Social Services 'had to appoint three people to replace me. One of them a minister'.⁶⁰

She believed that 'life began at forty'⁶¹ and relished the challenge of a new career. She did not, however, relinquish her other interests so that it is impossible to discuss her career chronologically. For the purpose of clarity, therefore, this section will discuss her earlier work in the Gateway, and the next four the Kirk Drama Federation, the Edinburgh Festival, her continuing work with the S.C.D.A. and her later work at the Gateway.

The decision of the Church to accept the gift and enter the theatre and cinema business was greeted with astonishment and derision by many:

The cynics (and, human nature being what it is, there were quite a few), sat back to watch the fun. Among those who duly disappointed them was Sadie Ross Aitken.⁶²

Initially the emphasis at the Gateway was more on films than on drama and so, in addition to becoming the first woman to hold a theatre licence in Scotland, Sadie became registered at the Scottish Screen Archives as the second woman in Edinburgh to hold a cinema licence, the first being Peggy Baillie who ran the La Scala in Nicolson St. between 1923-1930.

Sadie recalled that:

there were not many cinemas showing what one calls the better films, documentaries and so on. There was no Cameo then and the best of foreign films and Mr. Candlish thought it would be a good thing to have.⁶³

According to McAra:

For the first two or three seasons, the majority of the [Gateway] programmes consisted of films, particularly first-class foreign films, at that time a rarity in Edinburgh.⁶⁴

In addition to the regular programme, members of the Gateway and members of Edinburgh Film Guild⁶⁵ had the opportunity to attend special film screenings of the 'Famous Film Series', which included Hitchcock's *Blackmail*. There were also special screenings of public information films, made for the Scottish Office, such as *Seed of Prosperity*, about Scotland's seed potato industry or *Fair Rent*, which was about Rent Tribunal procedures. According to Butt, the popularity of such films had begun in 1940, when the Ministry of Information formed the Non-Theatrical Film Scheme which organised 'special shows of films of a social, as distinct from an educational character'.⁶⁶

Although Sadie was more fortunate than most theatre managers in having the building rent free and the principal wages paid by the Home Board, there was no grant available to support her work. She recalled in an interview with Ian Wishart that showing films helped to finance drama at the Gateway in two ways, as 'we always had a week of film while they were rehearsing so that we would have an income'⁶⁷ and 'when we were doing entertainment plays, if they were balanced by one short documentary, we were exempted completely from tax'.⁶⁸ The exemption she referred to was the 1945 Budget measure of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Anderson, which exempted

organisations 'not established for profit' and whose aims were partly educational from paying Entertainment Duty. However, there was work to be done before any film could be shown and in an interview with Christine Orr, in 1947, Sadie discussed some of the problems facing her, most of which were caused by the 'scarcity of material and manpower'.⁶⁹ She recalled that "in those early days, you had to apply for a permit for a yard of linoleum or a bar of soap".⁷⁰

Sadie believed that to be successful 'a manager must have a good working knowledge of every job in the theatre to the extent of being able to do it personally'.⁷¹ Meta Gilmour remembers hearing Sadie explain the difficulties of teaching herself the manager's job and how, in order to find out how much soap was needed 'she just got down on her knees and scrubbed the floor herself'.⁷² One of Sadie's great skills, however, was her ability to motivate people, and relatives, friends and stage-struck volunteers, all keen to be associated with the Gateway, rolled up their sleeves to help her and the Gateway opened on schedule with what she described as 'fairly well equipped premises'.⁷³ Reg Laing and his mother were two of the team who tackled the grime and he recalled that while no-one was paid for their work, Mrs Laing later became cafe manageress and, until he went into the army in 1948, Sadie found backstage work and a few walk-on parts for him. One of those parts was with 'Howard and Wyndam and the Lyceum Company and it paid two guineas a week'.⁷⁴ While the building was being equipped and spruced up Sadie was involved with drawing up a programme policy and 'booking films, negotiating for visits from professional theatre companies and building a staff team to work to the ideal of providing programmes that will broaden and uplift the human spirit'.⁷⁵

She was keen to introduce professional theatre companies to the Gateway, in order to determine a standard of presentation which she felt was lacking in Edinburgh. So, for the first seven years, in consultation with George Candlish, the director, she experimented with different ways of having a professional company in residence for at least part of each year. Although Candlish had an interest in the theatre, and appeared from time to time, Bill Inglis⁷⁶ remembered in an interview that he spent more time upstairs, where he was involved with the Boys' Clubs, developing audio visual publicity material and making films for the Church. His forte, when downstairs, was wielding a hammer and helping to build sets. He and Sadie met for discussions in the middle of the day, but Sadie was in charge and it was her job to book films and plays. Sadie began by inviting companies such as Perth Theatre, Dundee Rep, Glasgow Citizens, the Scottish National Players and the Park Theatre Company, now Pitlochry, to visit. McAra recounted that in 'the first three seasons, some twenty-seven plays were presented ranging from Ibsen and Shaw to new plays by Robert Kemp'.⁷⁷ Sadie then introduced longer seasons when she employed producers such as Noel Ilith and, in addition, the Gateway had its own repertory company which Sadie described as 'ad hoc productions with local players, producers selected, designers selected and cast invited to come along'.⁷⁸ Bill Abbott, a semi-professional, who was one of the local players employed by Sadie, recalled in a private letter that 'I was in some seven shows over a couple of years, in particular the world premier of *...Let Wives Tak Tent* with Duncan Macrae'.⁷⁹ Tom Fleming, then a professional, was also involved in these productions and he described⁸⁰ how casts were assembled for each play which would run for ten days to a fortnight.

When the Gateway was officially opened as a theatre in October 1946 by Joseph Westwood, the Secretary of State for Scotland, the first performance was by Perth Theatre which presented *An Enemy of the People* by Ibsen. The first production by the Gateway company was the 1946 Christmas play, *When a Star Fell*, written by Robert Kemp, who described the players as 'a very gifted amateur cast'.⁸¹ The set for *When a Star Fell* was built on a shoestring budget by Stuart Harris who had to rig the stage, which had been out of use for years, with the help of a volunteer crew who had never worked in such a theatre before. He described the situation as a 'frantic business'⁸² but Sadie saved his sanity when she got two staff from the Lyceum Theatre, including the designer Bill

Garrard, to lend a hand for a few hours in the final stages on the show's opening night, Christmas Eve 1946. They had just completed a major re-rig of the act curtain, only ten minutes before it had to go up for the show, when Sadie appeared in the prompt corner and handed Harris the biggest tumblerful of whisky he had ever seen in his life saying 'I think you need this'. Harris, also leader of the Elm Row youth club which was based in the club rooms above the theatre, was designer and technical director of the theatre from its opening until the professional company was formed in 1953. He worked closely with Sadie and according to Harris, she had to walk many a tightrope in those early years, running the theatre on a shoestring and keeping it in line with the Kirk's policies.

There was no grant available then, so that it was essential to attract audiences. Sadie knew that it was important for some audiences to enjoy a pre-performance and interval drink, but there was no licensed bar in the Gateway. Douglas Muir is quite sure that the ingenious device rigged up by his grandfather George Muir, owner of the *Windsor Buffet* next door to the theatre, and the Goblins, Sadie's stagehands, had no authorisation from the Church, but it allowed audiences to have a refreshment, yet be back in their seats in time for curtain up. A wire was stretched from the window of Sadie's office to the back window of the pub where it was attached to a buzzer which sounded before each performance.

The coffee bar within the theatre was also popular with patrons and would accommodate upwards of one hundred customers on an ordinary night. Although Sadie did not interfere with the day to day running of it, she tried to ensure food was available which corresponded with the theme of the play; for example shortbread or oatcakes and cheese would be on sale if a Scots play was being produced. On one occasion, in 1950, the play, *The Man Who Ate the Popomack* by W.J. Turner was about a fruit which turned people blue so that Sadie decided to sell *Popomack* juice which she concocted from pineapple juice coloured with purple food colouring. The ingredients were both uncommon and expensive and she was unwilling to stock large amounts, but the idea proved to be a money spinner and Kay Inglis 'was forever getting tuppence worth on the tram up to the posh grocer in George St. for another bottle of juice'.⁸³

A Gateway membership scheme,⁸⁴ introduced by Sadie, proved so popular that Members' Meetings were held over three nights according to membership card numbers and the voluntary work of some members helped Sadie overcome many financial restrictions. One of them, Alistair Murray, at school, but interested in theatre publicity, began his twenty-two year association with the Gateway in 1946 by delivering posters, filling envelopes and selling programmes. In 1968, when the Gateway closed, he was still involved with the work of theatre and also President of the Gilbert and Sullivan Society which had then to find another venue.

Kay and Bill Inglis recalled that publicity photographs were taken by John Knight, a keen amateur photographer from Musselburgh, who was the only photographer allowed unlimited access to the Gateway. He would sit, unobtrusively, at the back of the stalls during performances and take as many photographs as he wanted. According to Wallace,⁸⁵ Knight had gained Fellowship of the Royal Photographic Society prior to World War Two and was a member of the Excellence and Service Federation of Internationale Art, Photographic (E.S.F.I.A.P.). Photocalls for the press were at dress rehearsals only.

Scene painters were often local artists who were rewarded with an exhibition of their work in the Gateway café. Kay Inglis recalled that Jimmy Stenhouse who painted the scenery for *Highland Fair* in 1948/9 was in fact not a scenic painter but an artist.

The permanent stage crew of the Gateway comprised an electrician, a projectionist and the two 'Goblins' (stage-hands). At night the Goblins worked in the Gateway, but by day they worked on a

dustcart in Leith, where they kept a lookout for props. During his years at the Gateway, Tom Fleming, made good use of their services and recalled that he had only to say he needed 'a bed or an old fridge'⁸⁶ and next day it was delivered. Volunteers swelled the numbers backstage when necessary and even her Church Elder, Charles Rawcliffe, an amateur drama enthusiast, found himself labouring backstage for two weeks when he innocently replied 'No' to Sadie's question 'Are you busy next week, Reg?'⁸⁷

Kay and Bill Inglis were backstage volunteers at the Gateway from the second show, *When a Star Fell*, 'right through until, well we did the first show in the Netherbow [The Church of Scotland's Art Centre]'⁸⁸ in 1972. Sadie took great care of her young volunteers and Bill, an apprentice electrician aged sixteen and Kay, a stage-manager aged seventeen, often worked until two in the morning, when Sadie would send them home by taxi. If working with a professional company, Sadie paid them expenses of £8.00 for a show, which was three weeks work, but as Kay explained she was a student, so she was 'fair chuffed to be put through the books'.⁸⁹ As Equity gained ground in the fifties, Kay could no longer work with professional companies, but Bill's electrical qualification allowed him to continue in the lighting department.

As a student John Duncanson earned £2.00 a week during the holidays working as a scene shifter and remembered that Sadie 'allowed drama students free entry to Wednesday matinees or other performances if there were empty seats. They would just turn up at the box office and ask for Sadie'.⁹⁰

Kay Inglis recalled in an interview that 'Sadie was a stickler for detail'⁹¹ and on many occasions Kay was sent to borrow props from antique shops or the museum armed with nothing more than the words 'Miss Aitken says'. Lenders received free tickets for the show and had their business advertised in the programme. The Colt 45, 'not a Scottish weapon and therefore not valued as an exhibit', borrowed from the Scottish Museum of Antiquities in Queen Street is still in storage there, but Dr. D. Caldwell of the Scottish Museum Service remarked⁹² that such an arrangement would no longer happen.

Sadie's attention to detail covered all aspects of the Gateway, especially the wardrobe department, and, according to Kay Inglis, Sadie was very interested in and knowledgeable about costumes. The Gateway wardrobe was located in a long corridor filled with 'drawers and drawers of costume stuff'.⁹³ According to Isobel Mackie, who worked in the box office for many years, Sadie acquired 'the most amazing stock of sanitary towels, of the really thickest absorbency possible'⁹⁴ and cupboards throughout the theatre were filled with them. Any Elizabethan padding needed was made from sanitary towels and even the snake in *The Death of Adam*, which coiled round the pillars of St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh, was made from them. Working on a shoestring budget taught Sadie to become quite inventive as she recalled:

if we wanted to dress James Gibson as a tramp someone from wardrobe was deputed to go down to the Cowgate... and find a good second hand outfit of some kind which was brought back and fumigated.⁹⁵

Friends and family never knew what article they would see on stage when the curtain went up on a new production. Elinor Sim, Sadie's niece, recalled that items

would miraculously walk down to the Gateway on their own and be revealed in their full glory when the curtain went back. We eventually got them back, but anything she thought they

needed to dress the set went.⁹⁶

In addition to films and drama productions, the Gilbert and Sullivan Society of Edinburgh put on shows in the Gateway every March from 1947 to 1967, the Kirk Drama Federation held their festivals there in May or June each year and Marjorie Middleton's ballet school and Ballet Rambert were frequent visitors. However, after seven years of experimentation Sadie recalled in an interview with Ian Wishart that Candlish thought:

the time is passed now for ourselves to do engaging of producers and players and so that is when the Edinburgh Gateway Company came into being and they had 12 seasons here...[and also]...when the Makars [an amateur company] came in and the idea was that they would do a large cast Holy Week Play for which they would go out-with their own membership and invite players to appear for them, which they did, and that went on for as long as the Edinburgh Gateway Company and a bit longer in fact.⁹⁷

The Edinburgh Gateway Company, 'on average, hired the theatre for 30 out of 52 weeks',⁹⁸ from Autumn until late Spring, and, although Sadie had no jurisdiction over the programme, the professionals soon found it prudent to gain Sadie's approval of their choice of plays. According to Michael Elder, Sadie had an

underground network of Kirk Guilds all over the surrounding district built up assiduously over many years and if she approved of a play she would organise bus parties to come in droves to see it. We soon learned that Company policy was largely dictated by Sadie.⁹⁹

Tom Fleming remembered that,

if Sadie liked a play you could be sure that it would be packed out and the run be extended by a fortnight. If Sadie did not like a play you would always know because the audience would dwindle slightly more quickly and you could be sure she'd said 'Oh I really wouldn't bother making the trip in this cold weather to see it'.¹⁰⁰

The furore caused by the advertisements for the 1960 Gateway production of *Lysistrata* could have been prevented had discussions with Sadie taken place. It was advertised as 'A rollicking excursion into impropriety' and the minutes of a special meeting of the Gateway Company Ltd., held on 23 October 1960, record that it was:

clear the Church had strong objections to the performance and would terminate the tenancy of the Theatre if it were intended to proceed.¹⁰¹

Two hundred and thirty-three years earlier a similar situation had arisen and the Presbytery of Edinburgh, on 30 November 1727, published an *Admonition and Exhortation concerning Stage-Plays*, part of which related to their concern over a company of players who were

Swearing, [using] *Obfcenity*, and Expreffions of a *double Meaning*... And there being good Reafon, from a printed Advertifment of theirs handed about the

Town, to expect, that the Plays which they fhall hereafter act will be of the like *pernicious Tendency*.¹⁰²

In 1960 it was not the *Lysistrata* 'theme' to which the Church objected; it was the particular version chosen by the Gateway Company. Sadie issued a press statement to that effect, which was never printed, in which she revealed that in 1950, at the request of Mr. Candlish and Noel Ilith, she had written to Christopher Fry asking him 'if he would write for us a new modern dress, reasonably small cast play, *Lysistrata* theme'.¹⁰³

Moultrie Kelsall¹⁰⁴ states that, had he consulted Sadie before producing *The Man From Thermopylae* as the final Festival production by the Edinburgh Gateway company, he would have known that Edinburgh folk do not buy tickets if they cannot pronounce the name of a play.

The Edinburgh International Festival

Sadie's knowledge of the theatre and her skills in management meant that she was often in demand by the Edinburgh International Festival to look after other theatrical events, such as when, in 1957, she was asked to organise the 'stage requirements for the Shakespeare recital which Sir John Gielgud was giving in the Freemason's Hall'.¹⁰⁵ On one occasion she refused to look after Edith Evans at the Lyceum on the grounds that 'the Lyceum had a permanent staff and I would take a very dim view if the Festival Society sent an outsider to the Gateway'.¹⁰⁶ She regretted her decision when she saw that whoever had done the stage-management had forgotten about the 'terrific rake' of the Lyceum stage and had placed a huge floral arrangement at the back of the stage:

and I'm afraid it fell and no matter where Edith Evans went on the stage that afternoon it looked as though she had been a naughty girl.¹⁰⁷

It was also through Sadie's management skills that Tyrone Guthrie staged *The Thrie Estaitis* in The Assembly Hall in 1948 although there has been some debate over who exactly proposed the venue. Some writers such as Priscilla Barlow¹⁰⁸ give credit to Robert Kemp, who, as a minister's son, would have been aware of its properties, but there is evidence that it was in fact Sadie who suggested it and made the appropriate phone call. She of course had prior experience of it after her coup with Bernard Shaw in 1933. Kemp recalled that he, Guthrie, Bridie and Willie Grahame of the Festival Society had spent the day visiting halls all over Edinburgh looking for a suitable venue and, by late afternoon, were in a 'merry' state and running short of cash. They visited the Gateway to ask Sadie to cash a cheque and, once she heard their plight, she solved it within minutes. Although Kemp had thought of the Assembly Hall, he had been reluctant to mention it 'in case they turned it down'.¹⁰⁹ Sadie went with them in a taxi to let them look at the Assembly Hall and the rest is history. She later provided Guthrie with a dressing room in the Gateway, which he used as a casting office.

The Kirk Drama Federation

Almost as soon as she moved to the Gateway and had access to accommodation Sadie's thoughts returned to the Church Drama Clubs with which she had worked in the 1920s. David Baxter had challenged the Kirk to organise 'the various church clubs, directing their efforts along higher and more educative levels...before this winter is ended'.¹¹⁰ However no one responded until ten years later when Sadie decided that what 'the Church clubs needed was some guidance in speech and movement'¹¹¹ and, after discussing her ideas with Candlish, contacted Kay Morrison who 'came along and took a class for us in the very first winter'.¹¹² Morrison was a speech therapist who had trained at the Central School of Speech and Drama. According to Anderson, she taught in Miss Sybill

Attwell's Edinburgh College of Speech and Drama - which began in rooms in Queensferry Street Lane in 1929, before moving to 9 Moray Place in 1933 - until it closed due to the war. She then took charge of speech therapy in Miss Glover and Miss Turner Robertson's school, which began in George Street 'then Miss Glover bought a house in Eglinton Crescent which had a beautiful basement with a theatre'.¹¹³

Morrison continued holding classes at the Gateway and according to Sadie, it became apparent after a year or two that the Gateway 'ought to be the headquarters of something where one can seek out help'.¹¹⁴ The leaders of all the little Church drama groups were called together and, in 1950, the Kirk Drama Federation (K.D.F.) was formed. Membership was open to all committed Christians and the aims of the organisation, as stated on a membership card, were:

- a. To correlate the activities of the members and to provide means of mutual help
- b. To assist members in the choice, production and presentation of plays.
- c. To organise Festivals for member groups, encourage the writing and presentation of plays and to explore the uses of drama within the Church.
- d. To encourage interest in drama, religious and secular, among the Churches.

In K.D.F. Festivals there were no placings or trophies, but a post-festival forum was introduced at which all the teams could meet the adjudicator who would 'go over any of the more glaring faults with them'.¹¹⁵ Although the General Assembly report on the Gateway, which followed the *Lysistrata* furore of 1960, 'advocated positive editorial discrimination rather than restriction',¹¹⁶ the same tolerant rules did not apply to the K.D.F. Kay Inglis¹²⁷ remembered one occasion when a minister insisted that a soldier who had to appear drunk on stage be seen to drink only a cup of tea. Objections to swearing on stage had caused the K.D.F. such problems that Candlish was forced to raise the topic at the General Assembly¹¹⁸ where it was decided that if it were a workman and the swear word was in context it could remain in the play.

When the Gateway closed the K.D.F. held their Festivals in St. Serf's Church Hall in Ferry Road (Goldenacre) until the Netherbow opened. It continued to flourish until 1970, when Sadie informed members in a K.D.F. letter that in a bid to boost flagging membership the committee had 'decided to inaugurate and sponsor two playwrighting [sic] competitions - open to the whole of Scotland'.¹¹⁹ Cash and the promise of a wide circulation of copies of the winning play was the prize and she encouraged entrants to use 'a multi-media presentation ...in which the use of sound on tape, visuals, colour transparencies, clips of 16 millimetre film can all be used in addition to spoken dialogue and commentary'.¹²⁰

By 1974, more needed to be done to increase membership and Kay Inglis, Secretary of the Interim Committee of the K.D.F., issued a *News Flash* in which tuition was offered on the use of the 'modern aids of stereophonic tape-recorders, microphones and transistorised dimmerboards'.¹²¹ She also outlined proposals to expand the K.D.F. to become a much wider body - *The Churches Drama Association* - 'open to all Christians in the City of Edinburgh and in the new Regional Districts of Lothians and Borders'.¹²² The C.D.A. continued until the mid-1980s, when it became apparent that they were duplicating the work of the Netherbow Arts Centre.

Scottish Community Drama Association

Despite her other interests, Sadie continued her involvement with the S.C.D.A. and in 1947 was keen to use drama to link people and countries. She proposed that 'some aspect of International drama'¹²³ should be introduced at the Summer School and by 1949 was involved in negotiations with the British Council regarding financial aid to enable foreign teams to appear in Edinburgh at S.C.D.A.

Festivals. Negotiations were in progress with the French Consul-General in Edinburgh regarding a team from France and he was also inquiring about youth teams or 'Les Jeunes Compagnies' which would be willing to establish links with youth drama groups in Edinburgh. In 1950, the Edinburgh International Festival Committee arranged that whenever the address of an amateur body was obtained it would be passed to Sadie in order for immediate contact to be made. By 1950, arrangements were also made for teams from Canada, France and Wales to travel to Edinburgh and the S.C.D.A. Committee agreed that a team from a different country each year be invited to attend the Festival, the second week being international week. Before the arrival of the teams,¹²⁴ Sadie was busy organising hospitality and events which would enhance their visit to Scotland. She approached the Lord Provost's Committee which 'resolved that appropriate hospitality be extended';¹²⁵ Festival tickets were to be made available for foreign players and, after their week of performances, morning concerts and bus tours.

When suggestions were sought by the S.C.D.A.¹²⁶ on ways to celebrate their 'Semi-Jubilee' [sic] in 1951, Sadie proposed that, instead of holding a number of drama schools, the Association should combine these schools and charter a vessel for a fourteen day round-Britain cruise calling at London, for the Festival of Britain Theatres, Cork, Dublin, Liverpool and Edinburgh. In the event, the cruise did not take place and perhaps Sadie's vision was ahead of her time, but it is interesting to note that Walk The Plank, the Manchester based theatre company 'who own the only theatre ship in U.K. ...when moored at Burntisland in 1996 played to an audience of 5,000'.¹²⁷

Sadie's theatrical vision and instincts extended to many areas and she influenced the careers of many promising young actors. Alan Nicol, adjudicator, drama teacher and S.C.D.A. Administrator from 1985-1991, recalled that each Spring he received a series of phone calls from Sadie which began:

Alan dear, I was at the Academy/Queen Margaret/Kirkcaldy and I saw a young man/woman doing their final year show and really the talent that was shown was staggering. Now I've written to Kenneth Ireland [then director of Pitlochry Festival Theatre] about the performance, and I know how much he listens to you, if you were to phone him to endorse my opinion maybe we could get them a job for the season.¹²⁸

According to Nicol she was responsible for many students getting a start not only in Pitlochry, but in all the Scottish Reps and also in London, as he explained:

most of them never knew how they were approached by Managements, but Sadie was a force that shaped the future of Scottish Theatre.¹²⁹

One actor who does know that Sadie had a hand in his career is Paul Young who played 'young *Geordie*' in the film of that name. In January 1951, the S.C.D.A. magazine, *Bulletin*, carried an article about a film that was to be made from David Walker's novel *Geordie*. Applicants were asked to contact Sadie at the Gateway and as she knew Paul she recommended him for the part of the child. Robin Anderson, Administrator of Scottish Ballet, is another who knows and said 'I owe it to Sadie, she helped me so much in the early days'.¹³⁰

The Later Years

Pressure of work during her twenty-two years at the Gateway prevented Sadie from actively participating in the work of the S.C.D.A., but she always kept in contact and was 'ever conscious of the honour of honorary membership'.¹³¹ Similarly, over the years, her role within the K.D.F. became less active. Her workload decreased slightly when, in 1965, the Royal Lyceum became Edinburgh's Civic Theatre and the Gateway Theatre Company moved home; however the Gateway remained in business until 1968. When, in 1968, in an interview, Wishart asked Sadie if she was sad to be 'throwing out the papers and closing the theatre'¹³² after twenty-two years, Sadie's reply was 'Well, no. I am sort of without emotion. The time had come for me to retire and I really feel the Gateway has done its job'.¹³³

Others too thought that the Gateway had fulfilled its task as McAra wrote:

it had fostered the art of theatre in Scotland; entertained, amused and moved appreciative audiences; given scope and opportunity to Scottish actors and to native playwrights. It could justifiably be proud of its record.¹³⁴

Sadie however carried on working, despite often suffering severe pain. Kay Inglis recalled how she remembered Sadie was 'in quite a great deal of pain for quite a lot of the time'.¹³⁵ Isobel Mackie recalled that she had often to search the theatre for Sadie if there was a problem in the front of house and a call into the auditorium of 'Where are you Miss Aitken?' would usually bring the reply 'I'm in row D'. Lying flat eased the pain and she was often to be found lying on the seats of the auditorium, but Sadie refused to contemplate lying in bed at home.

Her retirement, after over forty years of service with the Church, which included twenty-two years in the Gateway, was publicly recognised when she was thanked by the General Assembly in 1968. However, according to the Netherbow Council minutes, Sadie had not finished with either the Church or its theatre: on 12 March 1974, due to the unfortunate coincidence of George Candlish's retiral with the sudden resignation of Miss Gray, manager of the Centre, the Netherbow was left without senior management and Sadie stepped into the breach becoming licence holder and Acting Manager until a new appointment was made.

Each year she came out of retirement to work for the Festival, in a managerial capacity, at St Cecilia's Hall in the Cowgate where she looked after celebrities such as Sybil Thorndyke, Flora Robson, Tom Fleming, Princess Grace of Monaco and Ian McKellen, the last appearing in 1977. The layout of the hall prevented latecomers slipping in quietly at the back, so Sadie devised a plan which required performers to stop their performance after seven minutes to allow the latecomers to reach their seats. According to Tom Fleming,¹³⁶ she had also been known to walk on to the stage and ask the owner of a car to remove it as it was causing an obstruction. Clive Perry described her as a 'character' and said that the audiences turned up 'as much to see Sadie as to see the shows'.¹³⁷ She was not however restricted to St. Cecilia's Hall. In August 1968, she took charge of the venue at 11 Cambridge St., the former Festival Office, where Jerzy Grotowski and The Laboratory Theatre from Wroclaw in Poland made their first British appearance with a version of Stanislaw Wyspianski's *Acropolis*. August 1973 found her in charge of Lodge Canongate Kilwinning where Russell Hunter and Rose McBain appeared in Ian Brown's adaptation of *Rabelais*. Scottish Television opened the Gateway for selected performing groups within the official Festival and, in 1972, Sadie was manager during a short season of Scottish Ballet. She returned in 1974, 1975 and 1976 when she worked with Robin Anderson and the Scottish Ballet.

At some point in her career Sadie had obtained an Equity card and she was a familiar face in *High Road* and other television programmes. Brown Derby believed that this was because she liked to 'be part of what is going on'.¹³⁸ In addition to all her roles already mentioned, over the years Sadie's was

a frequently heard voice on B.B.C. radio and in 1977 she was awarded the Queen's Silver Jubilee Medal in recognition of her work as a freelance theatre critic.

James Gray asked her (Evening News, 23 July 1979) when she was seventy-four, if she was thinking of retirement and she told him what she told everyone:

I always tell people that whenever I can manage Paul Scofield I'll retire gratefully and happily. I've got a great admiration for him but so far he hasn't come under my wing.¹³⁹

Sadie was awarded an MBE, but was too ill to attend the investiture at Holyrood on 11 June 1983. She later travelled to London where on 13 March 1984, in Buckingham Palace, the Queen presented her with the honour for services to theatre in Scotland.

Many people have speculated on Sadie's success as manager at the Gateway, which was not always easy an easy job, as Harris, who was 'still around as a member of the Gateway Council until the 60s',¹⁴⁰ recalled:

I can remember a few caustic remarks by disgruntled professionals. But her good sense, efficiency and warmheartedness beat them all. The job fitted her like a glove and she became nothing short of an institution.¹⁴¹

Sadie had to contend with not only the prejudice of the theatre professionals; many church professionals felt that any drama in a church theatre ought to be of a religious nature and according to Horace Walker there were those 'in theatrical circles who were very suspicious of the Church operating at all in this field and smelt Christian propaganda everywhere'.¹⁴²

Jimmy Mearns, a Goblin, attributed Sadie's success to what he believed was a sixth sense. She knew in an instant if anything had gone wrong in the theatre and would be down from her office 'like a shot'.¹⁴³ Bill Inglis said it was almost as though she had the theatre bugged. He remembered that there was a very strict rule which forbade anyone to bring fish and chips into front of house and, if anyone tried to come in with chips, she was 'down that stair like a shot'.¹⁴⁴ Sometimes the person would have hidden the parcel inside their coat 'and she'd stand there talking to them while the chips were burning'.¹⁵⁰ May Henry, in charge of the Gateway box-office for many years, attributed Sadie's success to sheer hard work and recalled that Sadie would often work from ten in the morning till eleven o'clock at night. Perhaps her success was due to all of those factors, but her personality must have helped a lot. Her niece described her as 'a larger than life character and she didn't give a tuppenny damn for what people thought of her. She was always right and nobody was going to say she was wrong'.¹⁴⁶ Ronald Hill described her as a 'Caledonian Lilian Bayliss'¹⁴⁷ and certainly many of Raymond Birt's descriptions of Miss Bayliss sound very similar to descriptions of Sadie heard in the course of this research:

A terror to work for, caring for nothing and nobody but her beloved theatre and the God with whom she was on such intimate and business terms; a woman with but one thought in her mind, one life purpose.¹⁴⁸

Sadie died on 5 January 1985 and an anonymous tribute in *Scene* described her funeral:

Warriston Crematorium was packed with mourners. In true

theatrical style - the way she would have wanted it - it was a full house with standing room only and as Sadie took her final curtain, each and everyone there, relatives and friends, professional actors and amateurs, said their goodbyes.¹⁴⁹

Sadie Aitken was a remarkable woman. In addition to being a dedicated career woman in the Church of Scotland Social Services department, and later manager of the Gateway, she was also an enthusiastic volunteer in the field of amateur drama. She had a consuming love of drama which she shared widely across the community, from the slums of the Pleasance to leafy suburbs like Davidsons Mains and her name was known the length and breadth of Scotland wherever the S.C.D.A. or K.D.F. was in operation. She also demonstrated, through her years of involvement with the boys at the Pleasance, her belief in the value of community drama in areas of urban deprivation.

This paper has shown that Sadie was well qualified to take control of the Gateway Theatre in 1944. Her early professional background and extensive experience in the field of amateur drama, both as participant and administrator, equipped her to deal with most contingencies and she could call upon an extensive network of contacts for advice and assistance when necessary, as in the case of rigging the stage curtain for the 1946 Christmas show. She was a dynamic force who put a great deal of energy into drama especially in the Gateway which gave such Scottish writers as Robert Kemp a dedicated stage. Lack of money in the early years did not stand in the way of her vision of staging Scottish drama and she had no compunction about using film, music or any other means at her disposal to help achieve her goal of staging good quality drama in her theatre. She had excellent marketing and promotional skills, which she used to the benefit of everyone involved with the Gateway, as was demonstrated by the huge membership she built up after only two years as manager. She was a moving force in Scottish theatre.

Macmerry

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