

Still Cool for Cats? The Life and Times of Wildcat Stage Productions

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Introduction

Given the commitment, the talent, the company's enthusiasm, does the end product live up to expectation? The answer must be an unqualified 'yes'. Wildcat's debut on Thursday on a ramshackle stage before a capacity house in the McLellan Galleries was one of the most hopeful omens for Scotland's theatrical future. ¹

Thus the inception of the new Wildcat Stage Productions was lauded in September 1978. On 25 September 1997, the Scottish Arts Council (hereafter SAC) announced the outcome of its new procedures for allocating revenue funding on a fixed-term basis to touring companies. Its news release stated that:

SAC recognises that Wildcat has produced some excellent work in the past and has a loyal core audience...It was considered that the quality of Wildcat's recent work and its declining audience figures did not justify such a long-term commitment at the expense of funding companies which submitted exciting and innovative proposals. ²

The criteria used by the sub-committee charged with making recommendations were indicated in guidance and were based on three broad headings: the quality of the artistic plan and vision for the company; the ability of the company to deliver the artistic vision; and the strategic value of the company's submission. All the criteria were also to be matched against the SAC's published priorities which were:

- increasing the availability of and access to the arts in Scotland
- the arts in education
- support for the indigenous arts
- establishing international links
- encouraging innovation
- improving marketing within arts organisations ³

The decision that Wildcat Stage Productions would no longer receive revenue funding from SAC signalled, not the end, but certainly a significant fall from favour for this company nineteen years after its own exciting and innovative debut. This re-evaluation illuminates features of the company's works, SAC policy and the state of Scottish theatre over that period.

David MacLennan has described the conditions in which Wildcat Stage Productions was launched in 1978:

[W]hat I think is forgotten now is that at that time there was an enormous kind of explosion in the touring circuit. There was room...It was possible to do more work. And in a way it was as much audience-driven as anything else. There was this great appetite growing for touring theatre and it was an appetite we wanted to serve. ⁴

David MacLennan, David Anderson and Ferelith Lean who founded the company had worked together within 7:84 (Scotland), with MacLennan a member of the original 7:84 from its inception in 1971. Anderson was a rock musician who had joined the company on the strength of seeing *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*, learning his trade as an actor from his first part in McGrath's 1974 *The Game's A Bogey*. ⁵ In 1977, Anderson wrote *His Master's Voice* about the music industry, a play on which rock music was core to the medium, rather than supporting scenes. This was directed by David MacLennan. It was revived by Wildcat in 1982. By 1978, a new opportunity to develop work within their own company had developed whereby an incentive of project funding to start the company up was made available. Lean joined them as the administrator of the new company. The close links that remained with McGrath were exemplified by the fact that MacLennan remained on the board of 7:84 and returned to direct shows for them; and that McGrath would work with Wildcat following his resignation from 7:84 (Scotland).

So, emerging from 7:84 (Scotland), the three co-founders aimed to produce a form of musical theatre distinct from that produced by 7:84. According to MacLennan:

David [Anderson] and I were developing a style of work which had a greater musical content than the other style of work done by John McGrath in 7:84, and it became clear that it was difficult to have a company that was good at doing what John wanted us to do and good at what David and I wanted to do because we were looking at people with different skills. ⁶

Their first production was *Painted Bird*, funded as MacLennan explained, by the SAC:

We got the unthinkable sum of £18,000, and then another £30,000 for a further project. I don't think that you would find many project-funded companies getting that nowadays. ⁷

By the end of their first year, the company had mounted eighty performances of these two productions attracting a total audience of 19,000, receiving SAC subsidy of just over £50,000. ⁸ In 1978 the SAC was willing to take a risk on a new company; by 1997, the company's then record of achievement was not sufficient to retain revenue funding.

The company's record

This record, the longevity of which was no small achievement in itself, was characterised by a number of elements. The first of these was the development of an innovative form of theatre that cannot be reduced to agit-prop or documentary, or be accounted for in terms of traditional dramaturgy. It is a unique form of musical theatre that has often paralleled the construction of a rock or pop theme album rather than narrative drama. In this respect the company was the descendant of groups like C.A.S.T. (Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre) in taking forward the radical popular form of musical cartoon theatre which emerged in the 1960s in England. Through this form the company has explored a range of political and social issues such as homelessness (*Dummies*, MacLennan and Anderson, 1979); world food distribution (*The Barmecide Feast*, David McNiven, 1980); new technologies and mass unemployment (*Blooter*, MacLennan and Anderson, 1980); nuclear arms proliferation (*1982/Any Minute Now*, MacLennan and Anderson, 1982); cuts in National Health Service funding (*Bed-Pan Alley*, MacLennan and Anderson, 1984); the miners' strike (*Dead Liberty*, MacLennan and Anderson, 1984); and the Poll Tax (*Harmony Row*, Peter Arnott and Peter Mullan, 1990). American culture and cultural imperialism were recurrent targets in shows like *Hot Burlesque* (David McNiven, 1981) and *Business in the Backyard* (MacLennan and Anderson, 1985). Epic productions of the work of the displaced John McGrath⁹ represented a re-uniting of the company with its roots in the early 1990s in shows like *Border Warfare* (1990); *John Brown's Body* (1991); and *A Satire of the Four Estates* (1996). Thus, the company produced work which was relevant, topical and within the political tradition of popular theatre.

It was a popular theatre within a culture promoting Scottishness as a portmanteau for many identities suppressed, excluded or oppressed by dominant British political culture at that time, particularly expressed through the English neo-nationalism of Thatcherism.¹⁰ Wildcat helped to mobilise and was in turn able to draw on this culture of resistance which was characterised by a relatively stable consensus of what Scotland was not. Moreover, it maintained a close association between Scottishness and British socialism and labourism avoiding a narrow Scottish nationalist platform. From this it can be seen that the company's work changed from what George Szanto (1978) terms 'agitational propaganda' to an 'integrational' function in the face of the dominance of the New Right.

That shift was marked to a greater reliance on shows that drew on aspects of working class life and popular culture as the 1980s progressed: *The Steamie* (Tony Roper, 1987) set in a Glasgow Public Laundry of the 1950s; *Waiting on One* (Anne Downie 1988) set in a bingo hall; and *The Celtic Story* (MacLennan and Anderson, 1988), the celebration of the football club's centenary. Although there were some attempts to re-evaluate working class culture (specifically sexual stereotyping) in shows like *Same Difference* (Liz Lochhead 1984), the critiques implied in these were replaced by a more celebratory approach to aspects of working class life. Even with a production like *Cleaning Up* (Lynn Bains 1990), which directly

promoted co-operative working practices and criticised competitive tendering and the privatisation of local authority services, the playing by an all-female cast, *a capella* singing and broad humour put it more in the vein of *The Steamie* than any of their polemical shows. In *The Silver Darlings* (John McGrath, 1994), the company continued this aspect of the work with an adaptation of Neil M. Gunn's popular Scottish novel of the same name.

Such a prolific body of work might itself be considered all the more valuable since it has consisted almost entirely of new productions by Scottish writers, meeting the SAC's priority to support indigenous arts. In addition to David Anderson and David MacLennan, writers such as David McNiven, Liz Lochhead, Marcella Evaristi, Peter Arnott and Peter Mullan, Tom Leonard, Anne Downie, Tony Roper, Andy Mackie and Lynn Bains have all written work for the company. Performers too have benefited from its loyalty to them at times when Scottish actors could not always make a living in Scotland such as Terry Neason, Elaine C. Smith, Myra McFadyen and Rab Handleigh. The company's exploitation of the renewable pools of talent it has formed around it stood it in good stead in its combination of polemic and entertainment in its programmes.

The critics

This output had met also with critical acclaim, at least initially. In 1982, a review by Joyce McMillan commented that

Wildcat stand together with 7:84 as the most successful professional touring companies in Scotland, and Wildcat's latest show...has emerged as a tremendous popular and critical triumph. ¹¹

However, the extent to which their popular form might eventually become repetitive was noted in Mary Brennan's review of the show 1982: 'the hidden dangers in establishing a recognisably different theatrical style is eventual predictability'. ¹² If this comment identified one area of potential weakness, Cordelia Oliver had already identified another, to which critics would continuously return, in her review of the 1980 show *Blooter*: 'The fugal density of the music and the potency of the best songs...are by no means matched by the book which seems pretty thin: this is an area on which Wildcat needs to work.'. ¹³ David MacLennan rejected the division as at best misplaced and at worst arising from a complete misunderstanding of what the company attempts to do:

[V]ery often when Wildcat shows are reviewed, they are reviewed in theatrical terms...and the critics view the book as the bits that lie between the songs. In Wildcat shows the songs are absolutely integral to the feel of and meaning of the piece and our songs do rather more than songs do in most musical theatre...Very often we're criticised for the slimness or weakness of the book when really it calls for a different kind of listening and approach. It's curious criticism when you read that the book is weak and then read paeans of praise about the songs that make

up seventy or eighty per cent of the show. ¹⁴

While this early defence has much merit, not all charges against the work can be easily refuted. Dialogue has often been the occasion of simple lecturing, sideswipes at paper tigers, or aimless digression. Weaknesses in storylines, plotting, pacing and characterisation have occurred in a number of the shows, in both the musical and non-musical elements. Performers, expected to be able to sing, play an instrument and maintain the creation of the dramatic world, have not always done so convincingly, with theatrical impact being lost in the transitions between modes of delivery.

Even given these weaknesses, reviewers seemed to have tired easily with the form and have been unable to differentiate its qualities from individual productions that do not exhibit them. The aesthetic of the form challenges dominant dramatic construction and does require a different kind of engagement. This relies not on the rational persuasive power of the material but in the performative relationship set up between performers and audience. The pleasure of the text in a Wildcat performance comes not from 'the book' or the lyrics of the songs; rather, it is in the *jouissance* created by and within the event. ⁴ This relies on the emotive and emotional engagement with the performance and the performers. In the absence of these, logical and rational criteria find the work unconvincing and trite. The essential complicity between the audience and the performers is lost. ¹⁵

One of the difficulties facing the company, then, was that on the evidence of their returns to the SAC, the size of audience willing to engage in such complicity was diminishing. It is difficult to talk about issues of quality directly, since the criteria for judging it depend so obviously on ideological perspectives. The carping of critics about Wildcat shows had done little to diminish their popularity throughout the 1980s. Thus, an examination of the company's audience figures may reveal whether or not in the judgement of its audience, Wildcat was maintaining the quality of its output. Certainly, the company had established and was able to retain a core audience from very early on. Whilst the first tours relied on the audience built up by 7:84 (Scotland) throughout Scotland, by 1983 the company had initiated a commitment to urban popular audiences, combining performances in community centres with large-scale venues. Ticket-pricing which remained accessible to the working class was extremely important. The company's *Business Plan* in 1990 acknowledged this as a major factor in the company's success:

This policy was developed through our experience as a touring company when the majority of our performances were given in community centres in urban areas of considerable deprivation. We discovered that even small ticket price increases led to the swift decline in audience attendance. We were also influenced by the low ticket price policy operated by the Citizens' Theatre in Glasgow at that time, which was producing consistently good audiences. ¹⁶

The success in building a widespread working class audience was acknowledged when Glasgow Celtic Football Club approached Wildcat with a proposal to commission a

production to mark the club's centenary in 1988. As Greg Gieseckam ¹⁷ has pointed out, the conditions of the proposal meant that it was a shrewd business deal rather than an altruistic gesture by the club. It indicated the closeness of identification between Wildcat and the urban working class from which both it and Celtic drew their support. So, from a baseline of support of 19,000 for the first two shows, the company recorded attendance of 28,813 in 1996-7. While representing a net growth, this is much reduced from the company's most successful years in the late 1980s when programmes which included *The Steamie* drew audiences of over 111,000 in 1987-88 and over 146,000 in 1988-89 with the success of *The Celtic Story*. Nonetheless, the most recent figures represent a re-building of the audience base from the low points of the early 1990s when audiences were just over 17,000. ¹⁸ So, in terms of audience appeal, the measure of quality is at best ambiguous.

The rationale for the decision

Wildcat's record was one of producing new Scottish theatre in a form that it had itself developed, for a loyal and distinctive audience. ¹⁹ Why, then, was it not included within the SAC's plans? According to Robert Love, chair of the Drama Committee:

[O]ur emphasis in making our recommendations was on the plans for the future presented by the companies. On this basis the other six companies' proposals offered greater variety, quality and value for money for Scottish audiences. ²⁰

Wildcat had done much to ensure both administrative stability and financial security by securing funds from a variety of sources including charities, trade unions, local authorities and its own box office revenue. It is ironic in hindsight that David MacLennan had believed that the company had, 'sussed out the realities' ²¹ of funding under Thatcherism. While the value of SAC subsidy per ticket had risen to £11 in 1992-93, it had been reduced to £7 by 1996-97. The ratio of SAC funding to other sources had itself increased from 1:2 in financial year 1989-90 to 1.2:1 in 1996-97. By comparison for 1996-97, for example, 7:84's ratio of SAC funding to funding from other sources was 2.7:1, and the amount of SAC subsidy per ticket was £18.54.

Changes in context

So, the nub of the SAC's decision rests not on financial considerations, but again on issues of quality and the company's 'strategic value'. This is to be expected, given that the greatest pressure for changes to the funding regime to which Wildcat fell victim came not from politicians or bureaucrats, but from the growth in Scottish theatrical culture itself. While in 1978, the SAC was keen to support new companies and collaborated with the founders to establish it, by 1997 it did not have to act pro-actively. On inviting bids for the new touring franchises the SAC was able to produce a short-list of fourteen companies from the applications it received. *The Annual Report and Accounts* for the SAC for 1996-97 lists some

twenty two touring companies who received project funding. This growth in the number of touring companies presented one form of pressure to include more new companies as revenue clients. Another came from the kind of work they were producing: for example, Boilerhouse's hard-hitting renditions of the lives of the under-classes were a radical challenge to the anodyne celebrations of working-class solidarity associated with Wildcat.

Further, while Wildcat may have nurtured new Scottish work in the 1980s, newer voices were not waiting for the patronage of this established company, but pushing themselves forward and demanding funding and recognition in politically astute ways: Boilerhouse's Paul Pinson taken on to the SAC's Drama Committee, for example. These pressures added to the demands of existing clients for more realistic funding for themselves. All the companies had demonstrated growth in their audience figures. Change was inevitable given the greater variety and quality of the new theatrical culture. In the face of three years of standstill grants from government the SAC was, like every other public service, having to re-consider its priorities to meet the new demands placed upon it. Rationing of funding was already a reality: the challenge to the SAC was to avoid killing companies through a 'death by a thousand cuts.'²²

Wildcat, a company that had heralded the new upsurge of creativity that marked the defiant 1980s, was itself displaced by the next wave, the conditions for which it had itself done much to create. It is, therefore, perhaps less surprising that the company should have had their revenue funding withdrawn than that such funding had continued unabated for as long as it had. The debacle over the removal of John McGrath from 7:84 (Scotland) a decade earlier was indicative of a diminishing tolerance of a left-wing affiliation as a protective mantle within even labourist Scotland.²³ The election of New Labour to Westminster and the unstoppable momentum towards Scottish devolution represented a victory for the political agenda with which Wildcat were aligned.²⁴ The political landscape had undergone a tectonic shift, moving on from the consensus against Thatcherism into a more fractured vision of the future. Artistically also, the association with John McGrath for its most expensive and high-profile productions appeared to signal a loss of control and relinquishing of form: neither of these appeared to be good signs for a dynamic vision to carry the company forwards in its own terms.

Conclusion

So, can the refusal of a touring franchise be regarded as a political decision? Yes, inevitably so since the capacity to decide the future of publicly funded arts is a political power and the decisions that flow from it are therefore political. At a more fundamental ideological level, the dominant political culture of Scotland is itself changing, moving away from labourism to a consumerist cosmopolitanism, which demands and thrives on the new and the innovative. It is characterised by discontinuity, challenge and departure from the old. Culture is a commodity like any other, and its value is weighed against what the public or the members of the SAC are prepared to pay for it.

However, in many other forms of entertainment, particularly rock music in which the company has its roots, shifts in fashion and taste and the ageing of the individual are regarded as cruel but inevitable changes which will render today's talent obsolete as a matter of course. It is only within the subsidised arts that such transitions are regarded with surprise or public outrage: subsidy is provided precisely to protect artists from the worst effects of change. In this sense, while not wishing to elevate the whim of fashion, or indeed the decision of the SAC, the stolidity of the funding regime which endured in Scotland and from which Wildcat benefited as one of the five revenue funded touring companies, secured a subsidised theatrical culture that was virtually inaccessible to innovation. The SAC's new policy for revenue funding for touring recognised painfully that such change and innovation could no longer wait. That it was brave enough to cut from its revenue funding the only company whose constituency remains the dispossessed and disempowered and whose values elevate the popular might suggest that its commitment is to innovate to produce more of the same.

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Footnotes

¹ Mary Brennan, 'Wildcat and the Painted Bird', *Glasgow Herald*, 16 September 1978, p. 9. [\[Return to Text\]](#)

² Scottish Arts Council News Release, 25 September 1997, p.1. [\[Return to Text\]](#)

³ Scottish Arts Council News Release, 25 September 1997, p. 7. [\[Return to Text\]](#)

⁴ David MacLennan, 'Interview with the author' (unpublished, 1989), p. 2. [\[Return to Text\]](#)

⁵ Elizabeth MacLennan, *The Moon Belongs to Everyone: Making Theatre with 7:84* (London: Methuen, 1990), p. 58. [\[Return to Text\]](#)

⁶ David MacLennan, 'Interview with Colin Mortimer' (unpublished, lodged in Scottish Theatre Archive, University of Glasgow, 1983), p. 1. [\[Return to Text\]](#)

⁷ Tom Shields, 'Wildcat - 21 Productions Up and Going Well', *Artwork*, 23 (1987), p. 3. [\[Return to Text\]](#)

⁸ All income and audience figures are based on returns published within the relevant SAC *Annual Report and Accounts*. [\[Return to Text\]](#)

⁹ In 1988, McGrath was forced to resign as Artistic Director of 7:84 (Scotland) under the threat of the withdrawal of revenue funding by the SAC should he remain in post. The grounds offered by the SAC for the threat were largely based on quality and issues of governance and funding. These were and continue to be refuted vociferously by McGrath.

The success of *Border Warfare* which 7:84's new artistic management refused to produce is seen by McGrath's supporters as a vindication of his role within 7:84 (Elizabeth MacLennan, *The Moon Belongs to Everyone: Making Theatre with 7:84* (London: Methuen, 1990), p. 94). [\[Return to Text\]](#)

¹⁰ See for example Cairns Craig (1989) for an analysis of this broad cultural function. [\[Return to Text\]](#)

¹¹ Joyce McMillan, 'Why nothing succeeds like a Wildcat success?', *Sunday Standard*, 8 August 1982, p. 12. [\[Return to Text\]](#)

¹² Mary Brennan, 'Review of 1982' in *Glasgow Herald*, 15 February 1982, p. 4. [\[Return to Text\]](#)

¹³ Cordelia Oliver, 'Review of *Blooter*' in *The Guardian*, 18 August 1980, p. 9. [\[Return to Text\]](#)

¹⁴ Charles Hart, 'Wildcat! An Interview with David MacLennan' in *Scottish Theatre News*, 5.3 (1981), pp. 4-10. [\[Return to Text\]](#)

¹⁵ The audience-performance complicity derives from the acceptance by each of their differing roles in the theatrical event and is based on an unspoken trust. When this trust is perceived to be broken, the individual spectator or the audience in whole or part withdraws from the performance through inattention, irritation or by physically leaving. [\[Return to Text\]](#)

¹⁶ Wildcat, *Business Plan* (unpublished, 1990), p. 5. [\[Return to Text\]](#)

¹⁷ Greg Gieseckam, 'Whose Glasgow? What Culture? Community Arts in the European City of Culture' in *Red Letters*, 24 (1989), pp. 6-7. [\[Return to Text\]](#)

¹⁸ However, given that the company was producing five shows to reach this figure, it is inevitable that this figure included a number of repeat visits from a diminishing core audience. [\[Return to Text\]](#)

¹⁹ The supremacy of the event in Wildcat's work is problematic in strategic terms for the company. The works are tied to the moment and ephemeral in both their content and their qualities. This has prevented the company establishing a legacy through which their work might be validated as important (e.g. as published texts). Moreover, within a relatively small theatrical culture, there could not even be immediate replication. It was a form tied to the company alone, so that problems with it within individual shows reflected on the form as a whole as a lack of variety. [\[Return to Text\]](#)

²⁰ Scottish Arts Council News Release, 12 December 1997, p. 2. [\[Return to Text\]](#)

²¹ David MacLennan, 'Interview with the author' (unpublished, 1989), p. 3. [\[Return to Text\]](#)

²²This phrase recurs in describing the parlous state of the arts in England in David Lister, 'Theatre confronts its death by a thousand cuts' in *The Independent*, 23 October 1990, p. 14; and in Euan Fergusson, 'An art scene in the throes of death by a thousand cuts' in *Scotland on Sunday*, 22 December 1991, p. 5. [[Return to Text](#)]

²³ This is charted in John McGrath, *The Bone Won't Break: On Theatre and Hope in Hard Times* (London: Methuen, 1990) and in Elizabeth MacLennan, *The Moon Belongs to Everyone: Making Theatre with 7:84* (London: Methuen, 1990). [[Return to Text](#)]

²⁴ It is interesting to note that the journal *Radical Scotland* closed itself down in 1991 not leastly in recognition that 'the case for self-government - and for a separate Scottish political and cultural identity - has been accepted in all but the darkest corners of Scotland'. In A Lawson, 'Why this is the final issue' in *Radical Scotland*, 51 (1991), p. 3. [[Return to Text](#)]

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