

New Scottish playwriting, old myths and real future needs.

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A country is never defined solely by its political and social circumstances, it is also judged by its cultural awareness and acceptance of its cultural and artistic diversities. Drama and theatre have a significant role to play in a country's everyday life, adding to its vibrancy and providing a lasting moral compass, particularly in the times of radical change. Scotland has a long tradition of drama that is separate and different from the rest of United Kingdom, at times overlooked in British theatre historical sources. Yet, there is a strange tendency even in those who care for Scottish theatre to appear to wish away its history. In 1999, Edwin Morgan observed that '[t]he general assumption in the past has tended to be that an overview of Scottish drama would not take very long. Between Sir David Lindsay and James Bridie, what was there of any lasting importance?' (Morgan 1999) Of course, what is considered of lasting importance may vary from one historian to another, but amidst the plethora of drama by Scottish playwrights between 1660 and 1800 explored by Terence Tobin (Tobin 1974), even if much would now be seen as old-fashioned and written for performance conventions no longer prevailing, surely Allan Ramsay's *The Gentle Shepherd* (1725:29) and John Home's *Douglas* (1756), both among the most produced plays in the United Kingdom in the eighteenth century, have at least a lasting historical importance, and arguably remain fascinating additions to the canon. Alongside a process of suppressing the memory of the lively Scottish drama over the centuries, there is, though this trait is common in other theatre traditions, a tendency to mythicise even recent events.

This forum article considers three examples of such mythicising while considering some of the most recent developments in new writing in Scotland. The first myth it addresses is that Scottish theatre has no real theatre canon and had its theatre suppressed after the Reformation for centuries. The second is the strange case of the mis-identification of the three instigators of the foundation of the Scottish Society of Playwrights in 1973. The third is not so much a myth, as a failure to give credit to the group who initiated and designed the initial work of Playwrights Studio Scotland, launched in 2004. It has been possible with regard to the last two, more recent, myths, to consult those who were actually involved in or close to events.¹ With regard to the first, recent histories show that to imagine Scotland has long been without theatre for any substantial period is simply misguided (Findlay 1998; Brown 2013).

Even as distinguished a critic as Edwin Morgan is found in a misapprehension when he proposes that one reason for a supposed absence of a history of theatre in Scotland was that Scottish theatre has grown out of popular forms, and that in the past while 'local writers were not

encouraged to produce individual plays [...] the local genius had to find its expression through pantomime, and later music-hall, where a wealth of local references and language could be inserted, but within the limits of those modes of entertainment.' (Morgan 1999) The work of Tobin alone is evidence that this is a misapprehension. Yet, Morgan claims that this uneasy marriage of theatre with popular traditions later contributed to the failure of the work of such literary authors as Bridie to be welcomed with enthusiasm 'roused by later companies like 7:84, Wildcat, Communicado and TAG, which employ modern variants of pantomime and music-hall song and gesture and dance' (Morgan 1999) So, even the success of Bridie is mythicised as failure in the context of claiming a weak theatre tradition in Scotland. Even in Morgan's lifetime lively examples of a continuing tradition were to be found. The Scottish National Players, for example, established in 1921, toured Scottish regions before World War Two with work by Bridie, Robert Bain, John Brandane and Joe Corrie with the purpose of developing and promoting 'Scottish national drama through [...] plays of Scottish life and character' (Craig and Stevenson 2001: viii). By the time they closed in 1951, the Players had presented 131 full-length and one-act plays, half of them premieres. Alongside this development, the Scottish Community Drama Association was established in 1926, encouraging the production of plays, new and old, by amateur companies across Scotland. It was out of the example of such companies and, specifically, the five amateur companies that joined to form Glasgow Unity Theatre in 1941 that Unity's professional post-war company was established, leading to the production of work by writers like Robert McLeish, Ena Lamont Stewart, George Munro and, in time, Roddy MacMillan. Their work led to the development of more naturalistic playwrights, writing in Scots, like Hector MacMillan, Bill Bryden and Tom McGrath among others in the following five decades and 'appealed to an urban public which rejoiced to see and hear a degree of realism (at times melodramatic, at times nostalgic, but mainly honest and down-to-earth) applied to recognizable situations and settings [...] and unfolded with both comedy and pathos' (Morgan 1999).

One could look, then, to 1921 and the beginning of the Scottish National Players or 1926 and the SCDA's launch for the foundations of modern drama in Scotland. Certainly, the latter supported new writers in Scotland from the winter of 1926/27 when an executive committee, comprising the four founding fathers (C Bernard Childs from Edinburgh, D Glen Mackemmie and Hal D Stewart from Glasgow, and Walter R Cuthbert from Dundee) met in Glasgow to organise the first Scottish festival of amateur drama. Ever since then, SCDA One Act Festivals have contributed to the emergence of a new wave of playwrights including more recently Jaki McCarrick who was the winner of SCDA National Playwriting Festival with *The Mushroom Pickers* in 2005, and Nancy McPherson who, having won five trophies at the Festival for her one-act play *Camouflage* in 1988, won again for *Becoming Maggie* in 2010. The SCDA also directly sparked interest in working-class drama, already beginning to be addressed by Joe Corrie and his Bowhill Players in the 1920s, as well as providing a theatre context for the companies that came to form, as already noted, Glasgow Unity Theatre Company whose writers addressed contemporary urban issues, in vernacular Scots, in language

that was contemporary, authentic and shared by its audiences. In 1947, the Glasgow Unity was one of the companies that established what soon came to be called the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, which brought to Scotland foreign innovations and the sense of vibrancy that became crucial for the further development of contemporary Scottish playwriting. Another direct influence of the Edinburgh Festival was the foundation of the Traverse Theatre in a tiny room and adjoining offices in a former brothel in James Court, off Edinburgh's Lawnmarket, in 1963, before moving in 1969 to the Grassmarket, and in 1992 to their base in Cambridge Street. The Traverse's commitment to staging new plays was not a key policy from the start, although many new plays were presented as part of its programme in its first decade or so, under directors like Max Stafford-Clark, Michael Rudman and Mike Ockrent. These included several new plays by Stanley Eveling and, later, C P Taylor's *Columba* (1973) and Stewart Conn's *Thistlewood* (1975). But after vigorous campaigning by, *inter alia*, the Scottish Society of Playwrights from its 1973 foundation and the arrival of Chris Parr as Artistic Director in 1975, the Traverse defined itself as a new writing theatre, as it still does. Gillian McDonald has cited playwright Rob Drummond's observation on being appointed one of the Traverse's Associate Artists in 2016 about the continuing importance of The Traverse's nurturing new talent: 'It's important because the industry itself will die without new talent coming through. Short-termism is a plague on our culture at the moment, and perhaps has always been.' (McDonald 2016) Drummond's point is crucial at a time when arts funding in Scotland has changed, and theatres such as the Traverse, Royal Lyceum and Tron are being forced to look beyond government subsidies to survive. The Traverse also works with the wider community through its Class Act programme (an annual school's playwriting project for fifteen to eighteen year olds) which celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2016. Through Class Act, students are asked to write a short play, with the help of a professional playwright, and work with Traverse directors and actors to develop their work. The programme is constantly evolving, in consultation with teachers, to coincide with current curriculum, and enable students' creative development, thus ensuring a steady influx of talented writers of future generations

Having noted all this activity, when interviewed by McDonald Drummond correctly pointed to the situation in the 1970s when the Scottish Arts Council, on the initiative of its then Drama Director John Faulkner established funding schemes (1973) to enable non-commissioned plays accepted for production to receive fees equivalent to those for commissioned work and to support second production. The initiative was backed by a distinguished panel of theatre artists and a dynamic Director, Sandy Dunbar, a man in Faulkner's words, 'with a pragmatic passion to release the creativity of artists in Scotland', and has been viewed as a direct result of a surge of premiere activity and repeats in, for example, the Royal Lyceum, where the season of 1972/73 saw five premieres (John McGrath, Stewart Conn, Bill Bryden, Roddy McMillan and Ian Brown), and one second production. The trend of new writing at the Lyceum continued under the artistic directorship of Clive Perry, and indeed intensified under his successor Stephen MacDonald (1976-1979), himself later a playwright², while directors at other theatres like Joan Knight at Perth and Kenneth Ireland at

Pitlochry also sought to present new work. In the early 1970s, the Pool Lunchtime Theatre in Edinburgh's Hanover Street offered another outlet for new writing under the quixotic leadership of Phil Emmanuel and John Cummings, and later John Abulafia. Faulkner was also instrumental in allocating substantial funding to the Scottish Society of Playwrights early in 1974, which allowed it to develop a programme of play workshops, publishing and playscript duplication and other support services for playwrights. In the 1980s subsequent funding cuts made it difficult for theatres to commit to second productions of new plays unless they were previous successes such as Tony Roper's *The Steamie* (1987), while funding was withdrawn from the SSP in 1984-85 as a result of redefined priorities at the Scottish Arts Council, discussed later in this article.

Despite this, the Scottish theatre industry by the early 1980s boasted the new work of authors such as John McGrath, Tom McGrath, Stewart Conn, Tom Gallacher, Donald Campbell, Liz Lochhead, Sue Glover, Catherine Czerkawska, Ann Marie di Mambro and Marcella Evaristi, to name a few. Following the success of Tom Buchan's legendary *The Great Northern Welly Boot Show* (1972) with songs by Billy Connolly, John McGrath and colleagues had set up 7:84 Theatre Company (Scotland) with its radical approach to new writing, pioneering small-scale, as opposed to commercial, touring theatre as an outlet for writing north of the Border. Since the later 1980s, there has been a further resurgence, a new wave of writers who now constitute new foundations for the Scottish theatre industry such as Anne Downie, Chris Hannan, David Greig, Steven Greenhorn, Rona Munro, Zinnie Harris, Douglas Maxwell, David Harrower, Gregory Burke and Anthony Neilson, again mentioning but a few. The Traverse has also found another way of infusing new blood into Scottish theatre production by running Traverse Young Writers and The Playwrights' Toolkit, which continue to bring together first-time playwrights with seasoned playwrights, directors and dramaturgs serving as mentors. These groups have so far produced a number of significant authors such as Morna Pearson, Cora Bissett, Stef Smith, and, more recently, Ronan O'Donnell, Anita Vettesse and Karen Dunbar. Such developments can all be seen to develop out of a long tradition of theatre-writing in Scotland over the centuries rather than, as is sometimes suggested, as a late twentieth-century development against a background of centuries of theatrical neglect.

The second myth this article addresses surrounds the instigators of the launch of the Scottish Society of Playwrights. The Society was founded in autumn 1973 at a meeting of Scotland's playwrights held in the Netherbow Theatre, at the instigation of Hector MacMillan, Ena Lamont Stewart and John Hall, although the calling of the meeting is often mistakenly attributed to Ada F Kay, Ena Lamont Stewart and Joan Ure. All three of the latter were in fact members of the first Council of the SSP under the founding Chair, Ian Brown, who with Kay and MacMillan drafted the SSP's constitution. The Society was set up as a playwriting promotional agency, with the purpose of negotiating contracts (establishing the first version of the current standard contract with the Federation of Scottish Theatre in 1974) and representing playwrights in dispute with theatre

managements. Very quickly, Brown met with John Faulkner who encouraged the Society's approach for funding and drew the Society's attention to the work in play development of the residential US National Playwrights' Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Center, Waterford, Connecticut. After a visit by Brown to Waterford in the summer of 1974, various adaptations, some peripatetic, of the O'Neill model were tested, including a not entirely successful residential version at Newbattle Abbey, south of Edinburgh in 1976, under the direction of Alasdair Skinner. Out of these trial attempts, the SSP developed a non-residential model of playwrights' workshops that has become recognised and used throughout the UK ³. The Society also published editions of neglected play texts, and a *Newsletter* which later developed into *Scottish Theatre News*. Its first Honorary Life President, in 1975, was Robert McLellan, succeeded in 1985 by Ena Lamont Stewart and, on her death in 2006, by Hector MacMillan. Its first administrator Linda Haase, who was appointed in 1976, was later going to help found the Tron Theatre, while her successor Charles Hart who arrived in 1979 went on to become New Writing Officer of the Arts Council of England.

After receiving Scottish Arts Council funding for ten years for its playwright support activities, the SSP lost its funding in 1984-85, when the SAC decided to withdraw funding from 'support services' in favour of 'direct provision', and, according to Ian Brown, 'remained impervious to the fact that support for playwrights through the SSP was in fact direct provision' (personal conversation). While it had to close down its important play-development workshops, publishing and copying services, under the leadership of its then newly re-elected Chair, Ian Brown, the SSP developed its current role as a union, becoming signatory to its first standard contract with the Theatre Management Association in 1986. It remains the main representative of Scotland's playwrights' voices through organising conferences (e.g. the SSP conference for northern-based playwrights in Inverness, 1999), publishing the first definitive directory of Scottish playwrights (2001) and more recently its 2014/15 *Survey of Scotland's Playwrights*, an analysis paper published by Fraser White on behalf of Christine Hamilton Consulting in November 2015. The SSP's loss of funding in the mid-eighties, although some of the money was used to establish a Literary Manager (Scotland) post, nonetheless, left a gaping hole in terms of an organisation that would nurture and support new – and established – playwrights. In time, this sense of an unmet need led to the foundation of Playwrights Studio Scotland. The foundation of this organisation is the third area in which – if not myth-making – a lack of clarity exists.

The development of the PSS grew eventually out of dissatisfaction with the absence of the kind of work that the SSP had provided in terms of playwrights' workshops and play development. After the withdrawal of funding from the SSP, the position of Literary Manager (Scotland) was an attempt to help playwrights by establishing a post, which was taken up by Tom McGrath and eventually based in an office at the Royal Lyceum. While McGrath was a fine dramaturg and highly supportive of younger playwrights, he was only one man. As time went on in the 1990s, his situation at the Lyceum

began to be seen, despite his best efforts, as too narrow a base for his work. McGrath himself recognised this, while Nikki Axford, who had been joint chief executive of the Lyceum between 1994 and 1998 and thereafter worked for a time in the Drama Department of the Scottish Arts Council prepared a discussion paper for the Drama Panel, around 2000, suggesting a revision of the way in which playwright development took place and outlining potential options for their support. When Axford went to work at Pitlochry in 2001, her colleague Jaine Lumsden set up a working party which included her, Tom McGrath, Ian Brown, Philip Howard – then director of the Traverse – and Peter Arnott to think how to move forward. It was this group which devised the detail of the format of Playwrights Studio Scotland. This was set up with McGrath's full co-operation when his post was closed down and the money re-assigned to PSS. As a result, in 2004, after the processes of final planning, accommodation and staffing had been resolved, Playwrights Studio Scotland was launched in Glasgow as Scotland's only arts organisation exclusively dedicated to the long-term support, development and promotion of Scotland's dramatists. Now funded by Creative Scotland, PSS receives applications from both seasoned and first-time writers, whose works are entered into mentorship schemes and developed to be presented on the stage, advises and supports playwrights on professional issues and organises research and conferences on important themes to do with the professional welfare of playwrights.

Alongside such an important development have run important other means of thinking about, and writing for, theatre. For example, the first fully professional Gaelic-language theatre company, Fir Chlis, though short-lived, was founded in 1977, stimulating before its demise in 1981 new approaches to Gaelic-language drama followed through by a variety of companies and playwrights, including, in an older generation partly receding Fir Chlis, Iain Crichton Smith and, in a younger, Catriona Lexy Campbell. The Imagine Festival – focused on theatre for children, and now called the Edinburgh International Children's Festival – was founded in 1990. This has always drawn on work for children from across the world, but has also always offered opportunities for new writing for young people by Scottish writers like Andy Manley and companies like Catherine Wheels, presented in the context of, and sometimes stimulated by, the best of international writing for children. In 2003, one of the co-founders of 7:84 (Scotland), David MacLennan, inspired by his experience of a similar venue in Dublin, and perhaps by memories of the 1970s Pool Lunchtime Theatre set up a new lunchtime writing venture, A Play, A Pie and A Pint, in the basement of Oran Mor in Glasgow's Byres Road, providing a venue for a wide range of playwrights and playwriting. On top of all this, since its inception in 2006, the National Theatre of Scotland has presented itself as a touring company without walls one of whose main roles is to promote the work of Scotland's playwrights at home and abroad. It has featured the work of writers like J M Barrie, Ena Lamont Stewart, John Byrne, Chris Hannan, Cora Bissett, Alison Lang, Emma Donoghue and Oliver Emanuel. It famously presented Gregory Burke's *Black Watch* (2006) round the world. It also toured internationally its immersive production of David Greig's *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* (2012) and took on tour such productions

as Rona Munro's *The James Plays* (2014), and the highly acclaimed *Eve/Adam* (2017), the groundbreaking production by a team of leading Scottish and UK artists including Cora Bissett, Chris Goode and Jo Clifford.

Regardless of all of these opportunities, it remains difficult for younger generations of playwrights to achieve first, let alone second, productions of their work. Although there are exceptions to the rule such as Gregory Burke, who was nurtured by the Traverse Theatre, on the whole it is true that even after a successful first run authors struggle to get produced again. Furthermore, as the new writing theatres such as Traverse and Tron grow more and more established, they are less willing to risk financially and artistically the staging of alternative voices. Although new writing companies do still operate – among others, Leith Theatre Trust, Stellar Quines, The Village Pub Theatre and Siege Perilous – and organise frequent events and festivals as well as readings of new work on a shoestring budget, new writers must try to find alternative ways or establish their own companies to produce new work. Most recently, on 11 October 2017, for example, Stellar Quines and The Village Pub Theatre collaborated to create an evening of new short ten-minute plays to celebrate International Day of the Girl, a global campaign to raise awareness of the worldwide inequality faced by girls. Similarly, the Leith-based professional production company dedicated to new writing, Siege Perilous (run by Artistic Director Andy Corelli and Producer Tina Finch), continues to offer a six-month development programme, The Avalon Mentorship, to emerging playwrights. This is run in conjunction with the company's Writer-in-Residence programme which started in 2011 when Caroline Dunford was announced as the inaugural writer-in-residence. In 2017, Siege Perilous toured with Davide Verazzani's *A Life With the Beetles* (first staged during the 2015 Fringe), the show in Edinburgh's Storytelling Centre in February being followed by performances in Skye, Thurso and Dumfries. Those with edgier tastes might have sought out the works of Michael Daviot, Tash McPhillips, Heli Kostadinova, Alex Staniforth and Ross Hepburn during The Edinburgh Horror Festival with its Halloween Fest of new horror and comedy shows between 27 October and 1 November 2017, in seven venues across the city (Banshee Labyrinth, The Tron, The White Horse, Otherworld Books, CC Blooms, Lauriston Castle and Monkey Barrel).

Nonetheless, the greatest opportunity for exposure of young authors' work now remains the Fringe, with an increasing number of young writers producing new work with their own standing or ad-hoc companies, such as satirist Ben Blow. His plays have featured regularly on the Fringe, including such as *In Totalitaria* (2005), a futuristic satire about nationalism, paranoia and a national security purge in 2015 Edinburgh; *A Tall Tale from the Fame Factory* (2009) about the dangers of reality TV; and *Vichy-Goings On* (2017), about ex-MI6 agent Albert Ogilvy's flight in 1948 Glasgow from different spy agencies who want to find out the location of Nazi gold he stole during the collapse of Vichy regime. With new platforms like Free Fringe and ESAF (Edinburgh Student Arts Festival, founded in 2015), there is a wealth of student and graduate companies determined to perform

alternative work by the newest generation of authors. These represent a significant move forward, but if Scottish theatre is to continue to thrive, more should be done to create opportunities for these young artists beyond ESAF and Free Fringe. Institutions like the Traverse, Tron, and Playwrights Studio Scotland are seminal in offering equal opportunities to new artists but the numbers are still painfully low, particularly when it comes to female and LGBT+ voices. HE institutions like Queen Margaret University offer advice in new business enterprises which may see an increase in the number of new theatre companies run by students and graduates, while several undergraduate and postgraduate playwriting courses are now on offer to budding writers (University of Glasgow, Edinburgh University, University of St Andrews and Queen Margaret University). The fact remains that in the ever-decreasing pool of funding opportunities this trend is likely eventually and inevitably to slow down. Scotland's playwrights have always been important in providing debate and reflecting on the ever-changing socio-political realities of Scotland as a nation. As such they should be our priority now and in the future.

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Notes.

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² See Ian Brown 2001 for detailed analysis.

³ See Ian Brown 2011.