**David Greig and Scottish Theatre**

There was once a widespread view that Scotland is a profoundly anti-theatrical nation. The roots of this lie in the soil of the Scottish Reformation. Records are patchy, but in the medieval period Scotland appeared to have as vigorous a tradition of folk-drama and religious drama anywhere in Western Europe (and, in Sir David Lindsay’s *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis* [1540] perhaps the greatest play produced in these islands before Shakespeare). With the turn against Catholicism, most of the religious plays that had enlivened feast days were at a stroke heretical and banned. Folk plays were outlawed on dubiously Biblical grounds. All other plays were to be submitted for hostile inspection by a Church whose face was set against image-making.[[1]](#endnote-1) As a result, so it is sometimes claimed, a deep suspicion was laid against any attempt at theatrical performance. Contemporary historians have tended to stress the persistence of theatre against these restrictions and insist that claims of Scottish anti-theatricality are much exaggerated.[[2]](#endnote-2) Indeed, anyone wishing to claim that this Presbyterian contempt for theatre still operates in the collective Scottish psyche will have a hard time explaining the remarkable flourishing theatre in Scotland in the second half of the twentieth century.

In the first half, Scotland’s most successful playwrights, such as J. M. Barrie and James Bridie, made their careers largely outside Scotland and largely in English. Their plays brought magic and lyricism to the London stage, Barrie’s fascination for the supernatural being demonstrated in plays like *Dear Brutus* (1917), *Mary Rose* (1920) and, in a way, his most famous play *Peter Pan* (1904). James Bridie’s mischievous social commentaries mixed Shavian debate with witty farcical structure and frequently scourged humanity by bringing it in conflict with the devil – *The Sunlight Sonata* (1928), *Mr Bolfry* (1943), and *The Baikie Charivari* (1952) all feature such encounters. However, as Gerard Carruthers has written, neither men is ‘entirely trusted by the most culturally nationalist versions of Scottish literary history for having been such a success in London’s West End’.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Bridie had, however, been a significant force in the development of Scottish theatre in the first half of the century, writing for and serving on the board of the Scottish National Players (an early attempt to found a Scottish National Theatre), helping establish the Glasgow Citizens Theatre in 1943,[[4]](#endnote-4) and campaigning in support of the Edinburgh International Festival first held in 1947. However, Bridie’s taste was for the sumptuous and the prestigious and was rather scornful of initiatives like Glasgow Unity which premiered plays depicting working-class Scottish life, including the remarkable *Men Should Weep* by Ena Lamont Stewart (1947). When the play was revived to enormous acclaim by 7:84 Scotland in 1982, Bridie appeared to be on the wrong side of history, and Stewart, author of vernacular plays that explored the specificity of Scottish experience, was the woman who had pointed the way to the future.

The first question that confronted Scottish playwrights wanting to found a native Scottish tradition is what language to write in. Many agreed with Alexander Reid who wrote in 1958 that Scotland’s contribution to world theatre will come from ‘cherishing, not repressing out national peculiarities (including our language)’.[[5]](#endnote-5) However, Scots as a language seemed to be dying out, its demise hastened by the spread of television, dominated by the BBC’s received pronunciation (ironically insisted upon by the Scottish Lord Reith). Certainly the stage Scots used for historical plays in the 1950s had a museological quality that hardly seemed likely to sustain a living Scottish theatre, any more than English theatre could thrive on a diet of pastiche Shakespeare. In 1968, Clive Perry, the director of the Royal Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh, stated flatly: ‘National drama with a tongue of its own is not for the future. Plays about contemporary Scotland will be in English with only a slight accent’.[[6]](#endnote-6)

In 1972, the poet Edwin Morgan wrote in some exasperation that ‘directors and managements seem to be hypnotised rigid by the polarity of Received Standard versus Costume Scots – neither of which any Scotsman actually speaks’.[[7]](#endnote-7) Through the 1970s, however, this polarity began to break down, and a new kind of stage Scots was developed, what Liz Lochhead has called ‘a totally invented [...] theatrical Scots’ and Donald Smith has described as ‘a poetic form of non-naturalistic Scots’.[[8]](#endnote-8) It is, in some ways, a fusion of English, Scots, and a distinctively working-class Glaswegian dialect that is robust, poetic, beautifully foul-mouthed, and capable of wicked humour, emotional eloquence, and great beauty. Key to this development were two theatres: the Lyceum, under Bill Bryden’s tenure at the Lyceum in the early 1970s[[9]](#endnote-9) and the Traverse Theatre, whose commitment to new Scottish writing had been its defining feature since its founding in January 1963.[[10]](#endnote-10) Through the 1970s, astonishing historical plays like, Stewart Conn’s *The Burning* (1971), Hector MacMillan’s *The Rising* (1973), and Donald Campbell’s *The Jesuit* (1976) were written, partly or wholly, in this lyrical, rhythmical stage-Scots and later plays like Roddy McMillan’s *The Bevellers* (1973), or Stewart Conn’s *Play Donkey* and Tom McGrath’s *The Hardman* (both 1977) showed that the contemporary world could be captured in the same language. These plays and this revived attitude to Scots helped establish a distinctive identity away from the British English that had dominated Scottish new writing.

It is no accident that this revived theatrical interest in Scots coincided with a significant revival in Scottish Nationalism in the 1970s. The plays fostered and connected with a growing political dissatisfaction with Westminster’s domination of Scottish cultural and political affairs. A key trigger was the discovery of North Sea Oil in 1970 and the conspicuous failure of Scotland itself to benefit from the riches it produced. This was most famously anatomised in 7:84’s *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1973) which drew on Scottish folk performance traditions to tell its story of colonial and neo-colonial exploitation and brilliantly stoked the fires of nationalism. MacMillan’s *The Rising* took as its subject an historical uprising against English tyranny which placed contemporary events in a clear context. In 1979 a referendum on devolution for Scotland fell foul of a controversial rule which, unusually, required not simply a majority of those voting but the support of at least 40% of the total electorate. In the event a narrow majority voted in favour of devolution but the proposal failed to meet this additional requirement.

This led, in the words of John McGrath, to ‘a terrible sense in Scotland of vacuum’[[11]](#endnote-11) and a period of uncertainty and retreat for Scottish nationalists. In some ways, it was not in the political but the cultural – specifically theatrical – realm that Scottish confidence continued to grow. As Cairns Craig has suggested, ‘the energies which had been built up in the political sphere suddenly had nowhere to go, and transferred themselves into cultural activity. Instead of political defeat leading to quiescence, it led directly into an explosion of cultural creativity’.[[12]](#endnote-12) ’The decade was a period of great infrastructural growth in Scottish theatre: local government spending on theatre in Scotland increased in real terms by 128% between 1982 and 1993 and the grant for the Scottish Arts Council by 23%. Between 1980 and 1992, the Tron, the Dundee Rep, the Arches, the Tramway and the new Traverse Theatre all opened and the King’s Theatre, Edinburgh, had a huge refurbishment.[[13]](#endnote-13) Glasgow’s Mayfest was founded in 1983 and 1990 saw the city take on the mantle of European City of Culture. High-profile large-scale shows like Bill Bryden’s *The Ship* and Communicado’s *Jock Tamson’s Bairns* both in 1990 exemplified this theatrical daring and confidence. A new generation of writers like Liz Lochhead, Chris Hannan, and, above all, John Byrne created a new idiomatic Scottish language which developed further that stage Scots of the 1970s without returning to British English. It was a hybrid language that seemed to reflect the cultural complexity of a hybrid nation. As David Greig remarked, these writers seemed to be saying ‘to create Scottish theatre you don’t have to write in Scots, nor do you have to write in English’.[[14]](#endnote-14)

This change in the attitude towards theatrical language in Scottish theatre again reflected a significant shift in the politics of the era. The campaign for Scottish devolution in the 1970s had concentrated on a traditional enmity with England. In common with other British left-wing parties, this had gone along with hostility to the Common Market. But in 1988, the leader of the Scottish National Party, Jim Sillars, persuaded his party to abandon its hostility to Europe and instead embrace a policy captured in the enduring slogan ‘independence in Europe’.[[15]](#endnote-15) By appealing to Europe, the SNP was appealing over the heads of the English to the European Community, and, at the same time, resituating itself as a modern party, in tune with the latest developments in Europe at the very moment that the British government under Margaret Thatcher was drifting in an ever more Eurosceptic direction. As Sillars wrote a year later, embracing the European project would mean activating intellectual and cultural powers ‘long buried in our provincial soil’ to the lasting benefit of the country: ‘Scotland’s people, politicians and media would be compelled to cast our intellectual net much wider than hitherto [...] we would be involved as never before in the big issues, the formulation and testing of big ideas in the future of Europe’.[[16]](#endnote-16) As we have seen, the theatre was ahead of politics here; the Edinburgh Festival, Mayfest, and the City of Culture suggested a performance culture already attuned to international influences. Glasgow Citizens’ Theatre had already established a tradition of adapting European classics for the Scottish stage and a series of hugely successful adaptations of the works of Québécois playwright Michel Tremblay into idiomatic Scots through the 1980s echoed the SNP’s interest in forging connections between smaller nations battling for self-determination.

What also began clearly to emerge was a vision of the cultural and political differences between England and Scotland. Margaret Thatcher’s government was particularly unpopular in Scotland – during the late eighties, the Conservative vote in Scotland collapsed and, twenty-five years later at time of writing, has still not recovered – and Thatcher herself came to personify everything unScottish about the English: ‘snobbery, boorishness, selfishness, and, by our lights, stupidity’.[[17]](#endnote-17) Scotland, by contrast, was coming to understand itself as ‘distinguished by its socialist, egalitarian tradition, its Labour history, its cultural cohesion and energetic participation in argument’.[[18]](#endnote-18) This is the context in which David Greig began his playwriting career. ‘By the time I’m coming back to Scotland in 1990 the civic identity of Scotland is largely settled and so is the theatrical identity of the country.[[19]](#endnote-19)

The result of this growing cultural confidence and the infrastructural investment in theatre was a dramatic increase in new Scottish theatremaking. In particular from the mid-eighties to the late-nineties, a vast number of Scottish playwrights emerged who would go on to have an international reputation: Chris Hannan, Iain Heggie, Sharman Macdonald, Rona Munro, John/Jo Clifford, Sue Glover, David Greig, David Harrower, Stephen Greenhorn, Anthony Neilson, Linda McLean, Douglas Maxwell, Zinnie Harris, Gregory Burke. These writers all differ widely in their concerns and their style. In the mid-nineties, when almost all of these writers were active, they mostly avoided the ‘In Yer Face’ mode that had become modish in London theatre, perhaps because their attention was drawn to the changing cultural and political landscape of Scotland. In 1997, a referendum finally approved the establishment of a devolved Scottish parliament, the first elections for which were held in 1999. Perhaps in tacit acknowledgement of the theatre’s role in keeping alive the task of reflecting on Scotland’s character and its place in the world, the Scottish parliament voted funds to establish the National Theatre of Scotland, which opened in 2006. As Adrienne Scullion has written, ‘Scottish writers will be vital in debating and describing our new social and cultural responsibilities’.[[20]](#endnote-20) With the prospect of a referendum on Scottish independence looming, as Trish Reid has argued, Scotland’s theatre still looks like one of the most important forums to ensure the prospect of ‘post-devolutionary Scotland developing a “new non-threatening nationalism”, one that can accommodate both the nation’s internal plurality and its ambition towards international engagement’.[[21]](#endnote-21)

1. . Bill Findlay, *A History of Scottish Theatre* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1998), pp. 16-17. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. . See, for example, Ian Brown, ‘Public and Private Performance: 1650-1800’ in Ian Brown (ed), *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Drama* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 22-40. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. . Gerard Carruthers, ‘Introduction’, in James Bridie, *John Knox and Other Plays* (London: Constable & Co., 1949), p. xi. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. . Michael Coveney, *The Citz: 21 Years of the Glasgow Citizens Theatre* (London: Nick Hern, 1990), pp. 48-55. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. . Quoted in Randall Stevenson and Gavin Wallace (eds), *Scottish Theatre since the Seventies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. . Quoted in Randall Stevenson, ‘Drama Language and Revival,’ in Ian Brown (ed), *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Drama,* op. cit., p. 76. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. . Quoted in Bill Findlay (ed), *Scots Plays of the Seventies* (Dalkeith: Scottish Cultural Press, 2001), p. xvi. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. . Quoted in Stevenson and Wallace, p. 5; Donald Smith, ‘1950 to 1995’, in Bill Findlay (ed), *A History of Scottish Theatre* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1998), p. 270. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. . Donald Campbell has said that ‘the impact that Bill Bryden made on Scottish drama during his few short years at the Lyceum cannot be overemphasised’, quoted in Bill Findlay, *Scots Plays of the Seventies* op. cit., p. xv. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. . See Joyce McMillan, *The Traverse Theatre Story* (London: Methuen, 1988). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. . ‘From Cheviots to Silver Darlings: John McGrath interviewed by Olga Taxidou’, in Randall Stevenson and Gavin Wallace (eds), *Scottish Theatre since the Seventies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 159. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. . Quoted in David Pattie, '”Mapping the Territory”: Modern Scottish Drama', in *Cool Britannia? British Political Drama in the 1990s*, ed. by Rebecca D'Monté and Graham Saunders (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), p. 147. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. . Donald Smith, ‘1950 to 1995’, op. cit., pp. 293-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. . Mark Fisher and David Greig, 'Suspect Cultures and Home Truths', in Anja Müller and Clare Wallace (eds) *Cosmotopia: Transnational Identities in David Greig's Theatre*, (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2011), p. 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. . James Mitchell, Lynn Bennie, and Rob Johns. *The Scottish National Party: Transition to Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. . Lindsay Paterson (ed), *A Diverse Assembly: Debate on a Scottish Parliament* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), pp. 200-201. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. . Christopher Harvie, quoted in David Pattie, ‘Mapping the Territory”’, op. cit., p. 146. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. . Elizabeth MacLennan, *The Moon Belongs to Everyone: Making Theatre with 7:84* (London: Methuen, 1990), p. 43. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. . Mark Fisher and David Greig, ‘Suspect Cultures and Home Truths’, op. cit., pp. 18-19. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. . Adrienne Scullion, ‘Contemporary Scottish Women Playwrights’, in Elaine Aston and Janelle Reinelt (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Playwrights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 114. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. . Trish Reid, ‘Post-Devolutionary Drama’, in Ian Brown (ed), *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Drama,* op. cit., p. 199. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)