

REFLECTIONS ON THEATRE IN SCOTLAND, by GERDA STEVENSON, (actor/writer/director).

Another day, and another preview under the belt – Communicado Theatre Company's *Tam O' Shanter* at Assembly, on the Edinburgh Fringe. But, for me, not just another preview. It was something special today, because the last time I performed in the wonderful arena of the Assembly Hall, at the top of the Mound, was some thirty years ago, in Sir David Lindsay's now rarely produced great, revolutionary play, *Ane Pleasant Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*. Among the fine cast, were Andrew Cruickshank and Robert Urquhart, directed by my old friend Tom Fleming, then Artistic Director of the Scottish Theatre Company. Another era.

Scotland's theatre tradition is an unusual one. It started with a bang in the mid 16th Century, and resumed after a silence of centuries. Sir David Lindsay's astonishingly modern epic is a major political drama, challenging the injustices wreaked by the pre-Reformation controlling powers of Scottish society, including the deeply corrupt (Catholic) church. It's written in gorgeously rich old Scots, full of French resonances, and a Chaucerian earthiness – prudes might call it "filthy" today. Seen at the time as heresy, copies were publically burned; it's lucky the text survived. Then came the fierce, cold blast of the Reformation, in some respects a force for democratisation, but nevertheless fundamentalist, with its Presbyterian anti-art agenda. This form of Protestant religion had, I believe, a spiritually crippling impact on Scottish culture, a legacy still apparent, particularly in the West Highlands and Islands. Presbyterianism is burned into our nation's collective subconscious.

I was reminded of this in a Donegal supermarket a couple of years ago, when the woman at the check-out, hearing my accent, asked where I was from. “Scotland,” I told her, “ I’m reading at the poetry festival.” “Oh, you’re a poet! Now isn’t that just grand!” she enthused. I can’t imagine such an exchange at a Scottish supermarket check-out!

In spite of its historical anti-art Presbyterianism, I think contemporary Scotland increasingly believes in the importance of art - including theatre - to all of its citizens. And the iconoclastic spirit of *The Thrie Estaitis* still survives, thanks to the pioneering Tyrone Guthrie, who, in 1948, exhumed Lindsay’s script from the dust of ages, and mounted a production of a shortened version (cleaned up – the Lord Chamberlain’s censorship prevailing then), at the Edinburgh Festival.

Scotland’s modern theatre tradition has roots reaching back through centuries to that great play – Ena Lamont Stewart’s *Men Should Weep* from Glasgow’s Unity Players, John McGrath’s 7:84 Theatre Company with its seminal *The Cheviot, The Stag And The Black, Black Oil*, and the National Theatre of Scotland’s *Black Watch* by Gregory Burke. While politics hasn’t necessarily defined its identity, social and political themes have been central to Scottish theatre for decades.

What’s the appetite for such work? How representative of our audience is such content and preoccupation? How political is the average Scot? According to opinion polls, most Scots want universal public services. Which is why Scotland isn’t a stronghold of the British Conservative party. We prize our National Health Service, our education system, and

try to cling on to them. Unlike our neighbours across the border, we have free personal care for the elderly, and our university students don't pay tuition fees. Ask Scots if they want to undo Margaret Thatcher's work and re-nationalise the railways, I reckon they'd respond with an overwhelming "Yes." There's evidence that Scots are predisposed to communality. There are theories about this – that it's the legacy of our ancient clan system; that our Kings and Queens were always of Scots, not of Scotland. What matters to us is the community of people. Interesting, in this context, to contemplate that Gaelic has no verb "to own".

Awareness of our planet's multiplicity of languages and cultures has become heightened with the advent of the internet. Dramatists increasingly employ the true voices of their characters. We're comfortable with foreign films and subtitles. We have public debates in Scotland about our languages, over the importance of nurturing Scots and Gaelic.

There's an appetite for plays written in Scots, the best known being translations of classics, particularly Moliere and Goldoni. The late Edwin Morgan created scintillating Scots translations, directly from the French. I was fortunate to play the title role in his *Phaedra*, and also took part in the original production of Liz Lochhead's superb version of *Tartuffe*. Plays in Scots are a vibrant part of our theatre tradition, and draw big audiences.

Over the last decade, a unique development in Scottish theatre has established a home for new writing, at Oran Mor in Glasgow - the *Play, Pie, Pint* lunchtime theatre season, produced by David MacLennan, with

an astonishing output of over 40 new plays per annum. There's a big energy in our small nation's contemporary theatre. And, having sat on two separate committees campaigning for it, I'm glad to see the establishment, at last, of the National Theatre of Scotland.

We have a long and rich, internationally recognized literary tradition, particularly in poetry and prose. Many authors, including excellent playwrights, live and work here, some known beyond our borders. It's not quite the same for the acting community – one or two stars have homes in Scotland, but most well-known Scottish actors live in London, New York or Los Angeles, the nerve centres of celebrity. Although I trained in London (where I've also lived and worked), I'm rooted in Scotland. I'm excited by the rich professional theatre we're creating here. An artistic director of a Scottish theatre company, interviewed recently about leaving to take up another artistic directorship in England, commented "...as you go higher up the career ladder, the opportunities to work on the kind of scale I'll be able to work on, with the kind of profile, get fewer and fewer. It's really hard in Scotland to say, 'Well, where do you go next?'" That view, still prevalent, though less so than before, implies that Scottish theatre is intrinsically second-rate. Of course, it's hugely beneficial to work in new places, get out of your comfort zone, discover new influences – but I wouldn't choose to do so for the reason quoted.

Virtually all the richly diverse professional theatre in Scotland today wouldn't exist without government investment. Business sponsors have their own needs in targeting a market, an agenda running counter to the artist's. Unusual or challenging art will rarely be supported from that

constituency. If we had to rely on private sponsorship, we'd see nothing but West End musicals on our stages. (Don't get me wrong – I love big musicals!) And they'd be confined to the cities. The kind of theatre that's being created in Scotland, performing in cities and rural areas, wouldn't happen, and you'd have a de-professionalised, dormant theatre workforce, reliant on teaching in colleges and universities to earn a crust, or, at worst, unemployed. Nothing wrong with teaching, of course. But a group of students isn't the same as a professional company. And, anyway, in the long-run, why study theatre if there are hardly any professional companies left to employ graduates? Without government investment, we wouldn't have live professional theatre out there, producing new writing, the work of skilled practitioners, questioning, breaking boundaries. This bleak scenario more or less describes the status quo of contemporary theatre in the U.S.A.

Of course, there's a role for non-state funding - Scottish theatre organisations are supported by individual trusts and some business partners - but most of our theatre companies (almost all registered charities limited by guarantee), rely on public funds. It depends on whether you believe in the spiritually civilizing force of art as fundamental to a nation's well-being. If you do, then your government makes provision for it.

How does our vision reach out across borders? Creative Scotland (the absurdly, and confusingly, rebranded Scottish Arts Council), has prioritised international touring, exchanges and connections. There's a public perception that working in the Big Apple or the Big Smoke *de facto* ensures future funding and future success. While this can be the

case, it's also true that cultures don't always easily transfer. I can think of real hits in Scotland that haven't been received well in London.

Nor can one say categorically that international touring has financial benefits (other than strengthening future applications to funding bodies). In my recent experience, I discovered the reality of such exportation. I toured my play, *Federer Versus Murray*, to New York this year, and found the surreal Visa application process to be costly, requiring an American lawyer to navigate the labyrinthine bureaucracy. Everyone who's experienced it knows it's one of the most time-consuming, stress-inducing administrative obstacle courses you'll encounter. In spite of the Scottish Government's efforts to export its nation's culture to America during the annual *Scotland Week*, the U.S. government is hardly holding its breath to receive its Scottish guests.

Another pressure, marching across every border, is the Stalker of Marketing: art must now be based on *brands*, the big idea, the theme that sells. I doubt that Chekov or Beckett ever sat down and thought: "What's the BIG IDEA I can I sell?" Of course, events in the world do inform artists' creativity, and so they should. But the prevailing celebrity and merchandise culture is a disease, a killer of art - death to the imagination, about nothing that's important or of any value, although it makes fortunes.

The celebrity cult is a conundrum: celebrity artists are hugely valued in Scotland (as everywhere), yet, although they've usually developed their skills through commitment to their art, professional art is generally seen by Scots as an indulgence, not 'real' work, and - particularly by

bureaucrats - as risky. But most artists I know have developed remarkable skills in responsible, reliable, shoe-string frugality. It's sickeningly ironic that under the prevailing business culture, bureaucratic organisations don't trust artists – a bit rich when we consider the recent disaster in the global financial sector, where business plans are supposed to have been the safety net.

In an economy driven by profit and competition, which has introduced business models into all its structures, the arts are problematic. By its very nature, art is indefinable, non-quantifiable. It doesn't respond to measurement by such pitifully unimaginative limitations. You can't assess a nation's spiritual wealth in terms of profit. Robert Owen, successful capitalist, iconoclast and social reformer, might have something to contribute on this subject, were he alive today. He certainly believed, early in his career as a mill owner at New Lanark during the 1800s, that the arts were fundamental to the health of his workforce. He provided education, daily dancing and music classes for all his workers and their children, set up infant childcare, and established many revolutionary social measures to enhance their welfare. He always said that music and dance were central to his philosophy of social reform. Businessmen during this early period of the industrial revolution, when slave labour in Britain's cotton mills was rife, were astonished to discover that Owen's New Lanark enterprise was the most profitable in Europe, and crime was negligible among his workforce. Perhaps some Owenite practices should be introduced in British schools, rather than Thatcherite Business Studies.

So where's Scotland heading? What do we see within our borders, and

beyond? The approaching referendum on Scottish Independence gives us an opportunity to ask ourselves: “What kind of a society do we wish to be?” A chance to put our heads together creatively, and dare to produce a vision from the mire we’re all wading through – the swamp of sinking aspirations, social deprivation and hardship, an unpardonable mess created by the globally rampant, criminally incompetent, rapacious, morally corrupt, tax-avoiding, bonus-grabbing, controlling financial sector. Do we want to be responsible, democratic, creative, caring citizens, respecting our environment, represented by a government that will ensure we can be just that? It won’t happen if we’re led by the kind of team currently in charge at Westminster. We’ll have no public services left if we leave it to them.

Sometimes I think about Shakespeare’s line in *Macbeth*, when Ross, referring to Scotland says: ‘Alas, poor country, almost afraid to know itself.’ I’d say there’s a collective psychological truth in that line. And there’s an energy in Scottish theatre that’s currently exploring such territory: David Greig’s *Dunsinane* responds in some ways to Ross’s statement. The plays we see at Oran Mor in Glasgow are packed with ideas, full of vibrantly relevant debate and imagination.

One of the things I love about Scotland - probably something to do with the inevitable intimacy of a small country - is the way the arts cross-fertilise: painters, poets, musicians, songwriters, novelists, dancers, playwrights and film-makers (not all of them Scots, thank goodness - people of various cultural backgrounds and nationalities), connect with one another, making for vibrant interaction.

Rabindranath Tagore, the great Bengali poet wrote in 1940, and I agree with him: “Love is kindred to art - it is inexplicable. There are other factors of life, which are visitors that come and go. Art is the guest that comes and remains. The others may be important, but art is inevitable.”