Linda Mackenney

The Oppositional Theatre of McGrath and MacLennan in Scotland, 1989–96

In this article, Linda Mackenney explores the four epic plays John McGrath wrote between 1989 and 1996 in the aftermath of his forced resignation from 7:84 Scotland in 1988. These were produced in association with David MacLennan of Wildcat Stage Productions and televised by McGrath's Freeway Films for Channel Four in the 1990s. McGrath died of leukaemia in 2002, and MacLennan died earlier this year after a battle with motor neurone disease; but the work they did together in the 1990s forms a significant part of their legacy. Linda Mackenney was introduced to McGrath's work as a student, when she attended the lectures at the University of Cambridge which were later published as his seminal critical work, *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre: Audience, Class, and Form*. She carried out the research for 7:84 Scotland's Clydebuilt Season in 1982, was the creator of the Scottish Theatre Archive at Glasgow University Library, and is the author of *The Activities of Popular Dramatists and Drama Groups in Scotland, 1900–1952* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2000). She was a member of the 7:84 Scotland Board of Directors between 1983 and 1988 and is currently completing a study of John McGrath's theatre writings.

Key terms: oppositional theatre, Gaelic theatre, devolution, arts funding.

THERE WERE two separate but linked events in Scotland in the month of June 2014. The first of these was the Edinburgh International Film Festival's retrospective season of films by John McGrath, the founder of the 7:84 England and Scotland Theatre Companies (1971–85 and 1971–88 respectively), who died twelve years ago after a long battle with leukaemia. The second was the death of David MacLennan, the founder of 7:84 Scotland's sister company, Wildcat Stage Productions (1979–98), and of Glasgow's A Play, a Pie and a Pint.

These events bring back into focus the theatre work produced together by these two men in the late 1980s and 1990s. Between 1989 and 1996, McGrath and MacLennan staged four enormously important, large-scale theatre productions: two epic, promenade productions in the Tramway in Glasgow, *Border Warfare* and *John Brown's Body*, staged in 1989 and 1990 respectively; and two adaptations by McGrath of well-known Scottish classics, Neil Gunn's *The Silver Darlings* (1994) and Sir David Lindsay's *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaites*, re-titled *A Satire of the Fourth Estaite*, presented at the Edinburgh Festival in 1996. Each was written and directed by McGrath and produced by MacLennan. The first two were also filmed by McGrath's independent film company, Freeway Films, for Channel 4 and screened at the EIFF's retrospective this summer.

It is good to be able to look at this work afresh. It has hitherto been neglected partly because almost everything McGrath did in the 1980s and 1990s remains overshadowed by the work he did for 7:84 in the 1970s, in particular the tour of *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil* in 1973, which remains the stuff of legend both in Scotland and for popular, political theatre history in general. But the later work hasn't just been overlooked, as if it were a victim of the quiet passage of time: it can also be said to have been conveniently forgotten, lost, or 'disappeared', in the aftermath of McGrath's forced resignation as artistic director of 7:84 Scotland in 1988 and the cutting of funding for Wildcat Stage Productions in 1998.

What brought McGrath and MacLennan together to produce these neglected works, written for a 1990s audience that McGrath called 'the Resistance'?[1] The two men had

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John McGrath (centre) directing 7:84 England actors in the 1980s.

known each other for many years: they were related through marriage, had worked together in the first 7:84 Scotland theatre company, and remained mutually supportive when MacLennan went off to form Wildcat. When I interviewed MacLennan, a short while after McGrath's death, he chuckled roguishly at the recollection of the 'glory days' when, as artistic directors of small but successful popular, political theatre companies, they had both been recipients of Scottish Arts Council grants and, full of daring and initiative, had proceeded to run rings round an establishment which, even in the immediate aftermath of the election of the Thatcher Government in 1979, remained surprisingly liberal in its attitude towards the arts.

The Crisis for 7:84 Scotland

McGrath's work at 7:84 Scotland in the early 1980s had three recognizable strands: there were small-scale political shows like *The Cheviot*; large-scale shows that were an offshoot of 7:84's enormously successful Clyde-built Season of 1982; and Highland shows, including *The Catch* (1982), *There is a Happy Land* (1985), and *Mhairi Mhor* (1986). The two Davids at Wildcat, Anderson and MacLennan, produced different work again, using less folk material and music and more recent industrial history and contemporary music, appealing to a young, urban audience: one of their most successful shows was *The Celtic Story*.

However, by the mid-1980s, and the start of Thatcher's second term, there was seismic change in the air. In 1985, 7:84 England's grant was ruthlessly cut and, for the next three years, McGrath fought for the survival of 7:84 Scotland, endlessly submitting artistic plans to a Scottish Arts Council which was becoming increasingly hostile. At the discussion which followed the EIFF's recent screening of *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil* (filmed for the BBC's 'Play for Today' series in 1974), a member of the audience

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asked whether those on the Drama Panel at the SAC that forced McGrath's resignation had been politically motivated.

The fact that doubt prevails derives from the insistence in all the press releases from the SAC Drama Panel of the day that their reasons for cutting 7:84 Scotland were administrative and financial. From their point of view, McGrath had been held to account for running up a deficit, and failing to respond appropriately to increasing pressure to run what had originally been a socialist collective as a business, complete with a board of directors and a successful management team.

At best, the stance the SAC took on funding was artistically short-sighted. They regarded their primary function to be that of a self-styled consumer watchdog of the arts. When the then Chair of the SAC Drama Panel was interviewed, some ten years later in 1998, she said that 'one' of the SAC's 'great policies' was that they would 'always balance the books and there won't be a deficit'. The reason she gave for this was that, 'It is public money which you are accountable for financially and you are accountable for it artistically.' Clearly, 'balancing the books' was an end in itself.

While there is a clear sense of financial responsibility here and some sense of artistic responsibility, even with the benefit of hindsight there is no real ability to see what the SAC Drama Panel's role in developing the arts might have been, or how artistically damaging tying artists to their financial apron strings had proved to be. It is only at the end of the interview, in response to steady questions from Catherine Cassidy, that the former Chair of the SAC Drama Panel reluctantly concedes that cutting McGrath and 7:84 'at its best' may have been 'a mistake'.[2]

McGrath's perspective on all of this was, of course, very different. His reasons for offering his resignation are stated clearly in his letter to his Board of Directors, in which he expresses frustration as an artist, working in an increasingly bureaucratic climate, in which administrators and managers were becoming increasingly powerful, and costly, at the expense of artists themselves and the actual work going on the stage.[3] His words, which echo down the decades to the present time, were dismissed by the Chair of the SAC Drama Panel as those of a 'man of intelligence', a 'genius', sadly lacking, not only in the right managerial-cum-financial know-how, but the requisite people skills.

This argument won't really wash. McGrath undoubtedly struggled to work with a succession of SAC-approved administrators in the last three years of 7:84 Scotland, a series of young professionals who were convinced that endless compromise with the SAC was the only reasonable course of action. But the passage of time has shown that McGrath was right to mistrust unwieldy bureaucratic control. His administrators, caught up in the moment and, in some cases, too easily manipulated by the SAC, failed to grasp the true nature of the artistic and political ideological conflict between McGrath and the SAC, or see where it was really going.

Poisoning the Water

What actually happens when a funding body like the SAC Drama Panel starves companies of funds and imposes heavy restrictions on the way they conduct themselves is that they thereby, as McGrath put it, 'poison the water'.[4] On the one hand, artistic directors, who are creative people, are forced to focus on raising additional funds and function as managers, as if they were producing a service in a restaurant. On the other hand, internal divisions in the company emerge when the artistic director and/or the management team becomes separate from the office staff and/or the actors; the latter in each case becomes distrustful, and anxiety – about loss of work and/or pay and conditions – begins to undermine the morale of everyone in the company.

It only remains to further weaken the camaraderie between like-minded theatre companies by putting them in the position of competing over an increasingly diminishing amount of funding, so that they become reluctant to defend one another and, in a worst-case scenario, are tempted to cash in

on damaging an opponent's reputation. All the funding body has to do is stand back and watch the companies struggling to make ends meet, at the same time becoming increasingly demoralized, and then accuse them of failing to keep an eye on their finances or letting their 'product' deteriorate in consequence.

McGrath was treated by the SAC as if he were the inadequate artistic manager of a small-scale company, but he was actually one of the most talented artistic coordinators and producers of his generation, who in the 1980s – in addition to heading up the two 7:84 companies – set up Freeway Films and was engaged in any number of other film and television projects, which brought further work for 7:84 Scotland, its administration, and its actors. His abilities were there for all to see: in the 1990s he was chief executive producer on films like *Carrington*; and he was chosen by Robert Redford to head up Moonstone, the European equivalent of the Sundance Film Festival.

He spent extraordinary energy on these projects: he was constantly on the move, in meetings the length and breadth of the country, his own papers filed meticulously in a canvas shoulder bag; and in the evenings almost always engaged in phone calls. He was also writing, writing, writing: the scripts for 7:84 were one part of a creative output that included film scripts and television dramas like *The Long Roads*, which he wrote and directed and for which he was awarded a Bafta. None of this self-evident managerial skill in setting up and seeing through such artistic ventures seems to have carried weight with the Scottish Arts Council Drama Committee of the day,

Today, it is difficult to see the SAC's cuts as anything but politically motivated. With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to see what happened to 7:84 in a wider perspective. During the years that followed, the vast majority of socialist theatre companies that had flourished in the UK in the 1970s lost their funding. And, in much the same way, American oppositional theatre companies that had been able to rely on National Endowment awards were squeezed by the Reagan administration: companies such as the San Francisco Mime Troupe and El Teatro Campesino, which had been recipients of NEA finds for 'overall support', were, like their British counterparts, forced to justify their grants by producing endless paperwork, or forced to apply for funding project by project, each application requiring detailed proposals submitted months in advance. 'This approach to funding,' as the San Francisco Mime Troupe's historiographer Susan Vaneta Mason wrote, 'disregards the creative process in original work.'[5] Her words echo McGrath's cries of frustration confronted with the same soul-destroying experience.

The Drama Panel and its 'Assessors'

Moreover, a study of internal SAC reviews of 7:84 plays conducted between 1984 and 1987 underlines the extent to which the SAC was politically driven, or at the very least prepared to draw on the evidence of those who were. The SAC reviews were written by members of the Drama Panel themselves, and their appointees: the Chair of the Drama Panel at the time, previously quoted, explains that 'every single member of the SAC Drama Committee had to go to a set number of shows and write reports'.

However, this became 'increasingly more difficult' and, as a consequence, 'Assessors were appointed who weren't on the Drama Committee'. These anonymous individuals 'were appointed by the committee because they were felt to have a very significant . . . well, they understood theatre, they were keen on theatre, they saw a lot of theatre and they were literate'.[6] It is clear from this halting account that the far from transparent process by which these appointments were made had become increasingly difficult to defend: note the hesitation after the word 'significant', and the progressive qualifications from 'understood' to 'keen' to merely 'literate'.

The reviews themselves are critical of all three strands of 7:84 Scotland's work, the large- and small-scale Lowland plays and the Highland plays, but the real vitriol is reserved for McGrath's own work, which is dismissed by middle-class, amateur theatregoers with a degree of ignorance of popular

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theatre that beggars belief. What emerges most prominently is the reviewers' antipathy towards Scottish and/or working-class subject matter; the non-naturalistic form of the plays; and the 7:84 audience. The reviews are derogatory about Scottish culture in general and Gaelic culture in particular: reviewing McGrath's adaptation of Fionn MacColla's *The Albannach*, one writer declares the novel to be living proof of 'how second rate our culture is', before dismissing McGrath's adaptation as 'silly'.

Almost all the reviewers were antagonistic towards the non-naturalistic form. Several who came to see *Mhairi Mhor* took the opportunity of confessing their longing to see a fully developed naturalistic character of the kind popular with middle-class audiences in repertory theatres, entirely missing the point of the play. Others expressed their distaste for any discussion of political matters using popular theatre techniques, often adopting a deeply patronizing tone, as in: 'I do wish they'd take on board the fact that the average member of the audience is not likely to be deeply affected on hearing a list of nineteenth-century grannies beaten over the head by the villainous agents of oppression.'

The reviewers are derisive about the tastes of 7:84's capacity audiences. One observed that the audience at the play he was reviewing was 'pretty well full, of course', but that this was 'easily the most depressing feature of the whole experience'. Another, reviewing a production of *Mhairi Mhor* playing to a full house, added sneeringly that the play would 'probably go down a bomb in Gaeldom'.[7]

The company, on its diminishing grant, was being criticized whenever it incurred debt, because they had misspent the taxpayer's money. Yet the Scottish Arts Council Drama Panel, then holding 7:84 to account, was appointing deeply prejudiced reviewers who, in turn, were high-handedly determining what the taste of the taxpayer should be, with very little regard for the taxpayer's actual view, as expressed through capacity attendance at 7:84 shows.

Border Warfare and *John Brown's Body* were produced, then, in the immediate aftermath of McGrath's resignation as artistic director of 7:84 Scotland, and the appointment of a more acceptable management, following which 7:84's grant was magically restored. From this point onwards the character of 7:84's artistic output changed dramatically.

A Kind of Liberation

McGrath, in one sense silenced, was in another way liberated. He had lost the company he founded and with it funding and, more importantly, the audience in the touring venues throughout Scotland that he had built up over fifteen years. But in some ways this had the effect of freeing him from former constraints. McGrath had offered *Border Warfare*, the first in a series of large-scale epic plays penned in the aftermath of his resignation, to the new 7:84 Scotland, and, when they turned it down, took it to MacLennan at Wildcat, who asked him to direct it.

So began a new working relationship between McGrath, MacLennan, Wildcat, and Freeway Films that proved to be a positive and creative time for all concerned, incontrovertible proof as to the high quality drama a group of committed theatre makers with shared artistic and political values can produce, even with the threat of more cuts hanging in the air. It was to prove an excellent arrangement: McGrath was free to write and direct, benefiting from MacLennan's considerable skills as a producer and the chance to work with a new and larger company of actors, some like John Bett from 7:84's past, others from Wildcat, all with a willingness to embrace epic, popular drama.

Border Warfare and *John Brown's Body*, which followed in quick succession, were funded by Wildcat and Freeway, staged in Glasgow, and filmed as live performances by Freeway for broadcast on Channel 4. They were both pieces of promenade theatre: the former looked at the entire history of Scotland and its relationship with England, from primordial times to the late 1980s; and the latter at the history of the Scottish industrial working class from the early days of the industrial revolution to the present time.

Border Warfare, which is generally considered to have had more impact, was staged

Robin Begg, as William Wallace, and Juliet Cadzow in Border Warfare (1989).

in a Scotland which was still governed by a Thatcher government, for which few Scots had actually voted, and called for better democratic representation for Scotland. At the end of Act Two, which closed with the passing of the Act of Union in 1707, the audience who sat around the acting area as if they were in the Parliament, were asked to leave by one of two doors, according to whether they would have voted Yes or No on the subject of the union. Every night, a small number left with the Ayes, in favour of the union, and a large majority left with the Naes, voting for the return of a parliament to Scotland. There was just one abstention, when Donald Dewar, then a Labour shadow minister, known to be personally in favour of devolution while his party remained uncommitted, solved his dilemma by staying chatting in the acting arena throughout the interval. It became clear exactly how he would have voted, had he been free to do so, a few years later, when he left Westminster politics and took office as Scotland's first First Minister.

The productions were both staged in the Tramway, a flexible space that, in the course of *Border Warfare*, became variously the ancient forests of Scotland, the Scottish Parliament of 1707, and a football pitch. At one

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Scenes from *Border Warfare*. Above: The Act of Union, 1707. Opposite page, top: the football match. Opposite page, bottom: John Bett as Edward I.

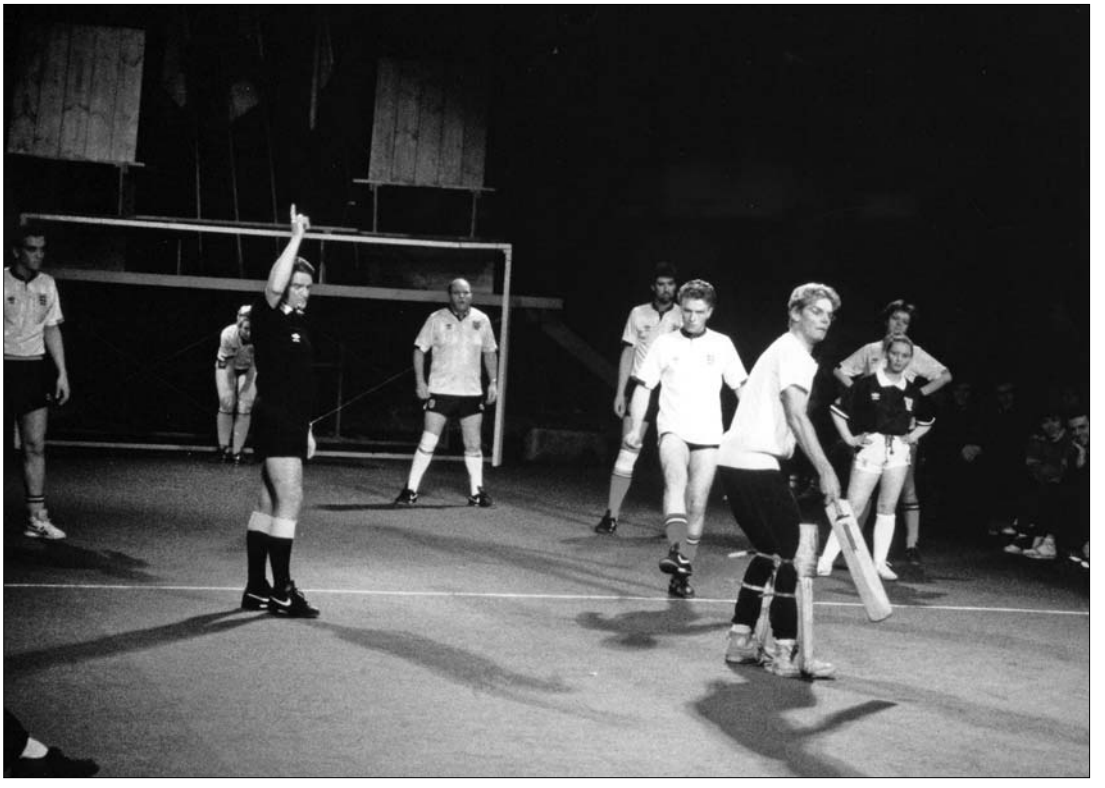
end of the space was England, from which Edward I launched his invasion, George IV jigged his way to Scotland to the tune of 'The Wee German Lairdie', and Margaret Thatcher mounted John Knox's pulpit. David Edgar was right to see *Border Warfare* as McGrath's single most significant production,[8] for the play was more than words, more than drama, more than scenes, characters, songs, and witty monologues. It was an ever-changing kaleidoscope of colour, movement, and dance, serenity and dizzy heights, rough, raucous, and sublime. It also contained some of McGrath's most lyrical writing – notably in the opening, the 'Welcome to the Forest of Scotland':

Welcome to the Forest of Scotland. . . .
Welcome to the Dark Ages, the Cold Ages,
the Age of Brute and Mammoth . . . Welcome
to the Green Forest of Scotland . . .
Here are bears, and beaver and otter
Here are wolves that wander at will
Here are pole-cat, pine-marten, wildcat spitting
Here roe-dear and red-deer and reindeer bellow
Badgers scuffle and pad along pathways
Hedgehogs trundle and hares leap high . . .
Welcome to the Dark Age of the Forest of
Scotland,
Ranging over us, eagle and raven and rook
Swoop to the bone of rabbit and weasel and
stoat:
Ferrets flash yellow and orioles flash golden
In shafts of sun under stippling birichen
Soft the needle-bed under pine and whin,
Snake under bracken, snail in her shell.[9]

It is almost impossible to believe that the the poet-playwright who wrote like this about Scotland was not considered worthy of independent funding by the Scottish Arts Council's own Drama Committee.

In the Aftermath of Devolution

It was intriguing watching the films of *Border Warfare* and *John Brown's Body* at the recent



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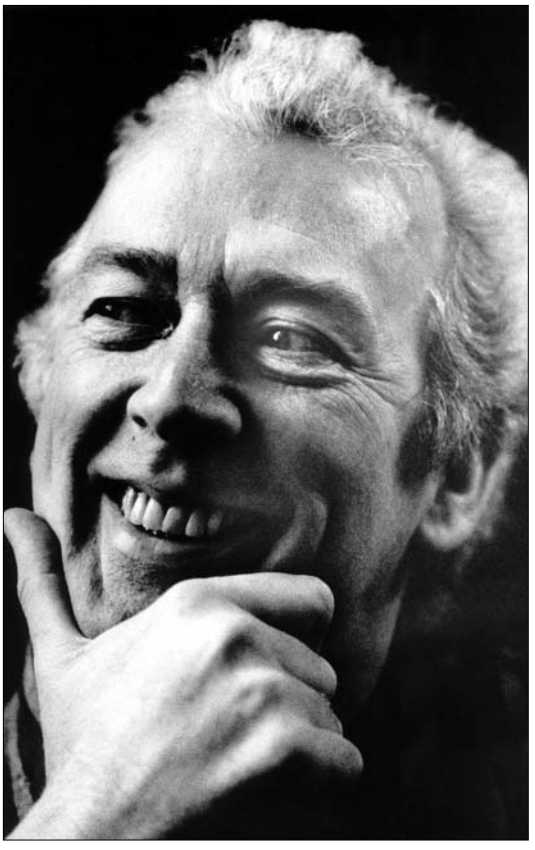

John McGrath at the time of *Border Warfare*.

screenings by the EIFF. While it was impossible to recreate for a film audience the level of intimate engagement that the live theatre audience experienced, moving around the auditorium as witnesses to the events of history, the plays themselves, the style of production, and the reactions of the 1989 and 1990 theatre audiences were there for all to see.

It is difficult to know what message the audience in the Filmhouse, living in devolved Scotland on the eve of the Referendum, took away with them. McGrath's vision was for a Scottish Socialist Republic and, watching the films, there is no doubt about where he stood and would still stand on centralized, right-wing government, and corporate capitalism. Margaret Thatcher's words in the closing scene of *Border Warfare* are as chilling as ever they were, and remind us that we are again in the grip of a government bent on dismantling the Welfare State in what they would seek to persuade us is our own interest.

But McGrath was always acutely aware of the impact of reactionary forces in Scotland itself, taking care to distance himself from bourgeois nationalism and align himself irrefutably with revolutionary socialism. *Border Warfare* and *John Brown's Body* satirize the self-interest and hypocrisy of Scottish landowners, entrepreneurs, and politicians through history, and this was not lost on the plays' audiences in 1989 and 1990; nor was it lost on the audience at the recent EIFF retrospective. Indeed, sitting in the auditorium at the Filmhouse, watching *Border Warfare*, what seemed to make most impact was the sequence of twentieth-century political wrangling between the Tories on one side and Labour and the Scottish National Party on the other, presented as a fast-moving football match. There were howls of laughter when Ramsay MacDonald buried his head in the pitch; when two of the six Labour MPs who went to Westminster in the 1920s with him were sent off while the others scored own goals; and when the SNP came on the pitch, moved 'straight to the right wing' and stopped the match to bring on a can of oil.

The Continuing Collaboration

McGrath and MacLennan were to work together again, in staging the former's adaptations of Neil Gunn's novel *The Silver Darling*s in 1994 and Sir David Lyndsay's late-medieval drama, *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaites*, now called *A Satire of the Fourth Estaite*, during the official Edinburgh Festival in 1996.

McGrath's commitment to Scottish history and literature is almost unparalleled and it is important to remember how valued this contribution was by Scottish audiences, notably in the Gaelic-speaking Highlands. In his introduction to the first edition of *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil*, he recorded the response of 'an ancient, near-blind, Gaelic poet, the bard of Melbost' to the play: 'I have heard the story of my people told with truth. If I die tonight, I die a happier man.'[10]

One of the most striking features of the film of that play – and the film of *There Is a*

Happy Land, which was toured in the Highlands and Islands some fifteen years later – was the response of the filmed audience, still pouring into the venue, singing the words of the songs, reacting to information about past wrongs and victories. Watching these today, one is reminded of the contrasting cultural values of McGrath, who felt this audience had a right to see their own history, literature, and language on the stage, and the SAC reviewers who slighted it because they considered it beneath them.

When it came to staging *The Silver Darlings* or the adaptation of *Ane Satyr of the Thrie Estaites* in the 1990s, McGrath was reviving works that middle-class Scots were much happier to recognize and claim, though the more conservative among them took issue with McGrath's stance on their political content. Lyndsay's original play had satirized the temporal and spiritual leaders of his day. McGrath's Lords Temporal – Thatcher, Major, and the as yet unelected Tony Blair – were represented by huge puppets made by a member of the Bread and Puppet Theatre from America: they greeted the audience in the foyer and led them into the auditorium at the European Energy Centre in Edinburgh.

McGrath and the Devolution Debate

McGrath's theme, once again, was the democratic right of the Scots to better representation. On the eve of the election of a Labour Government and on the eve, therefore, of a second Devolution Referendum, McGrath wrote:

> The urge to write *The Fourth Estaite* came when it became clear that, no matter how many second thoughts Blair may have, no matter how hard the Scottish Labour Party may try to make the Scottish Assembly powerless, they could not wriggle completely out of their commitment to some sort of constitutional change for Scotland. Now the people of Scotland want to make sure that the change is for the good, and is really what they want – a taste of democracy even.[11]

McGrath's main aim, like that of many of his peers who created interventionist theatre companies in the 1970s, had been to contribute to the creation of a counter-culture that he believed would prepare the way for social and political change. In his introduction to *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil* (Methuen, 1981), he had written:

> The theatre can never cause a social change. It can articulate the pressures towards one, help people celebrate their strengths, and maybe build their self-confidence. It can be a public emblem of inner and outer events and occasionally a reminder, an elbow jogger, a perspective bringer. Above all it can be the way people can find their voice, their solidarity and their collective determination.[12]

McGrath's ultimate aim, then, was to create a counter-culture that would undermine the capitalist system and, looking back today, he would probably say that he and his peers failed in this attempt because they were overwhelmed by the emergence of corporate capitalism, which under Thatcher and Reagan set about the dismantling of socialist and working-class substructures. But McGrath's work in Scotland can be seen to have effected change, in contributing to a demand for devolved powers.

When McGrath died, William McIlvanney, the eminent Scottish novelist, wrote that, 'He was one who helped give us the nerve eventually to demand our parliament back.'[13] McGrath's plays from *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil* in 1973, to *Joe's Drum*, written in the aftermath of the first Devolution Referendum in 1979, and culminating in *Border Warfare* and *A Satire of the Fourth Estaite*, written in the post-7:84 Scotland era, consistently urged Scottish people to demand more say in their political affairs. His timing in writing the last of these, on the eve of the election of a Labour Government after seventeen years of Tory misrule, was immaculate.

He was fully aware of what he was doing. He wrote in response to media criticism at the time: 'I have long argued that theatre along cannot achieve any social change. At best it can voice the demands of forces already in motion, or strongly desired.'[14] *Border Warfare* and *A Satire of the Fourth Estaite* certainly gave 'voice' to 'forces' that were 'already in motion' and 'strongly desired' because after their election the Labour

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Government kept their word and, in the ensuing referendum, Scotland voted in favour of new devolved powers.

The fourth estate referenced in the title of the play, was the media, in the person of the burgeoning media mogul, Rupert Murdoch, played by John Bett in a mask, white vest and shorts, and kangaroo slippers. It was incomparable satire, written quite deliberately in McGonagall-style doggerel, drawing attention to the extent of Murdoch's undemocratic influence on politics and his use, if not of phone hacking, then his equally low manipulation of sleaze and smear. McGrath wrote of this production that, 'presenting *The Fourth Estaite* to the English press was not unlike presenting the Murder of Gonzago to Claudius'.[15]

He did not expect the play to go down well with Murdoch's newspapers, *The Times* and the *Sunday Times* – nor did it – but he saw the negative reactions in the Murdoch press as a sign that his play had hit the spot. What he had to say then seems all the more convincing in the light of recent events. We can only imagine what McGrath would have written about Murdoch's recent performance before the House of Commons Committee, in the aftermath of the revelations concerning the behaviour of News Corporation and News International in general and the *News of the World* in particular, and the recent trials of Murdoch's lieutenants.

The Later Years

When we look back at these triumphantly successful large-scale shows presented to huge audiences in high-profile venues, we can see how closely they connect with McGrath's earlier vision of the General Gathering, a company he formed in the aftermath of the Clydebuilt season of 1982. In some ways, these large-scale plays (appealing to a middle-class as well as working-class audience, linked in their opposition to corporate capitalism) presented more of a threat than McGrath's small-scale shows: they entertained and stimulated their audiences to think, in much the same way that *The Cheviot* had done two decades earlier, only on a much larger scale, invading mainstream theatre territory.

But in Scotland at that time the idea that 7:84 or Wildcat, or any left-wing theatre like them, might aspire to fill the then still empty shoes of a National Theatre in Scotland was unacceptable to those who shared the views of the SAC's appointed reviewers. It was not surprising, then, that Wildcat, the last surviving popular theatre in Scotland at that time, lost its grant in the aftermath of *A Satire of the Fourth Estaite*.

And what happened to McGrath and MacLennan themselves? Following the loss of Wildcat's grant, MacLennan faced six years of intermittent freelance work. He was not one to give up and, recognizing that state funding was not only impossible for him to get but deeply constraining, with all the strings attached, in an extraordinarily ironic but successful coup he sought and got commercial funding for his next brainchild, A Play, a Pie and a Pint, which staged new lunchtime plays, initially in the basement at Oran Mor, an old church off Byres Road and the Great Western Road in Glasgow that had been converted into a bar, restaurant, and entertainment venue. Here he provided untold support for new Scottish and international writers. He was concerned with the latest production when he discovered that he was ill with terminal motor neurone disease, but continued working until within two weeks of the end of his life.

McGrath was already ill with leukaemia when he wrote *A Satire of the Fourth Estaite*. Over the next six years he devoted his still considerable energies to Moonstone, offering valuable support to aspiring young writers for film. His last play, *Hyperlynx*, was seen posthumously at the Edinburgh Festival in 2002. It was the last in a series of one-woman, small-scale shows that McGrath wrote in the 1990s, following on from *Watching for Dolphins* (1991–2) and *The Last of the McEachans*, performed at the Edinburgh Festival alongside *A Satire of the Fourth Estaite* in 1996.

Each was written for and performed by Elizabeth MacLennan, who undoubtedly made a huge contribution to the conception and realization of all three characters – iso-

lated individuals who form part of McGrath's 'resistance'. While Reynaulda Ripley from *Watching for Dolphins* is a former political activist – someone who was part of the forward momentum of the 1960s and 1970s, now paying the price in the 1990s – Heather Smithson, in *Hyperlynx*, is a character from the 'other side', an MI6 official who has slowly become sickened with her relatively small, footsoldier role in sustaining western capitalist supremacy.

We are painfully aware of their loneliness in isolation and, as each play concludes, there is little hope of this loneliness lifting, or the world changing for the better. What each character moves towards is recommitting themselves to action, to direct action, even if of the smallest kind, regardless of the chances of success. In many ways, as Olga Taxidou has argued, the three female characters in these late plays recall the three women in McGrath's first play for 7:84 England, *Trees in the Wind*.[16] They too are characters who must find their way, in a period of disorientation and disillusionment, without clear leadership, without means, without assurances of any kind. Reynaulda Ripley in *Watching for Dolphins* reflects:

> I went on a boat to Cyprus once, from Marseilles. As we rounded Sicily, there appeared a school of dolphins, playing with us, roving freely through the warm seas, frisking like kittens, having fun, moving as one. . . . Then, just as suddenly, they went away. I spent the rest of the voyage at the rail, hoping to catch another glimpse. I feel like that now, every night I read the newspapers, watch my telly, phone my friends – 'just to keep in touch'. But I stand here now, at the rail, at fifty-two, watching for dolphins. I scan the sea, but it's polluted, empty. But they are there. They will come.[17]

What Reynaulda is looking for are signs – small but clear signs – that something may be happening, that though the water has been poisoned, there is life yet. What the dolphins represent is hope, certainly, but more than that: they represent the first sign of activity, of life-enhancing, joyous resistance to the poison that surrounds them.

Hyperlynx was McGrath's last look at the health of capitalism, the 'trembling giant' of his 1977 play, now characterized as a worldwide, technologically enhanced predator. It was well received by discerning critics: one wrote, 'McGrath signs off his theatrical account with the anger, the commitment, not to mention the technique, undimmed.'[18] What the play had to say then resonates strongly today: 'The implications are that democracy does not exist, that the will of the people is replaced by the will of the global corporations, and nobody is allowed to object: they own the media and set the agenda, they name the names and indict the villains.'[19]

In many ways, his play, too, looks for political dolphins. It was written in the aftermath of the demonstrations by young anti-capitlists in Genoa: it looks at the motivation of the demonstrators who came 'because they believed something was wrong'. Heather Smithson is moved by their resistance to take action herself, 'for the rightness of what those peaceful protesters have perceived, for their recognition through the fog of media vomit and government evasive rhetoric of a threat to democracy and to humanity, and their willingness to stand up and say No'.[20]

Optimism of the Will

It is undoubtedly time to look again at the respective contributions of McGrath and MacLennan: they were both driven by what McGrath called the 'optimism of the will',[21] a desire to discuss the ills of their society in defiance of all constraints.

McGrath left a lucrative career in film and television to set up 7:84, and ran the company on a shoestring for the first few years. When he and MacLennan decided to produce *Border Warfare* and *John Brown's Body* in 1989 and 1990, they were taking a second huge risk with their own careers and livelihoods and both were punished for it, but they left a legacy in a body of work and a spirit of defiance that is there for others to follow.

At the end of *The Bone Won't Break*, McGrath reaffirmed the need for a theatre that would afford direct 'contact' with the audience, that would liberate itself from the bleak despair of postmodernism and from

those forms currently available in commercial and subsidized theatre, that would rediscover the oppositional power of laughter in subversive satirical forms, 'reinventing, rediscovering theatre with a glorious five-octave range'.[22] In his final piece of theatre criticism, 'Theatre and Democracy', McGrath argued again for provocative irreverence:

There is a need for a sharp, satirical theatre to scrutinize our values, to contest the borders of democracy, to give a voice to the excluded, to the minorities, to guard against the tyranny of the majority, to criticize without fear, to seek true and multifaceted information, to combat the distorting power of the mass media, to define and redefine freedom for our age, to demand the equality of all citizens for the short time we have on this earth before we die.[23]

Notes and References

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13. William McIlvanney, *Scotland on Sunday,* 27 January 2002.
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20. Ibid, p. 30.
21. John McGrath, 'The Last Twitch of a Dying Dogma', *The Scotsman*, 1 October 1997; reprinted as 'Thatcher's Dying Twitch', in McGrath, *Naked Thoughts that Roam About* (Nick Hern Books, 2002), p. 224–6. This article was written in response to the cutting of Wildcat's funding one year after their production of *A Satire of the Fourth Estaite*.
22. John McGrath, *The Bone Won't Break*, p. 155.
23. John McGrath, 'Theatre and Democracy', in *Naked Thoughts That Roam About*, p. 239.