

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

After the end of the 19th century, the Scottish theatre continued to function as a provincial extension of the London theatre, and by the end of the First World War, virtually all that remained of it as a distinct entity were variety shows and pantomimes. Everything else came from London-based production companies⁷ (Campbell, 1992).

During the twenties and early thirties, for many people, pantomime was the only kind of performance in which Scots could be heard on stage. A notable exception was the highly popular dramatic work of Joe Corrie in the field of social commentary. A tour of Scottish variety by the Bowhill Players of his 'In Time of Strife' played to audiences of 800-1000 in 1929. The Scottish National Players (1921-34) were also pro-Scottish in policies and personnel, and performed new Scottish plays, some of which were in Scots. The Scottish Community Drama Association had a role in performances involving the use of Scots in drama from its formation in 1926.¹¹ (Hutchison, 1998).

Before the mid-thirties, all the actors in our theatres were either English, or appeared to be English, and all dramatic concerns were confined to the lives of middle-class English people moving and posturing in the circle of say, Noel Coward. The life-styles of such people had little in common with those of the largely working-class Scottish audiences. Nowadays, plays are often supposed to be about socially-disadvantaged people who have replaced what used to be described as the working class, and the audiences are largely theatre buffs and yuppies! The former 'working class' is probably at home watching formula 'drama' on television. As like as not, this will feature meaningless lives on both sides of the law, of deranged individuals brandishing guns and involved in innumerable car chases.

In 1932, Christine Orr founded the Makars Club in Edinburgh, with the intention of performing her own plays in Scots and did some valuable pioneer work for drama in Scots. Shortly afterwards, the first (and perhaps the best) of a new breed of playwrights writing in Scots appeared. This was Robert McLellan,³ whose career began with a one-act play, *Jeddart Justice* in 1934. This was followed by a full-length play, *Toom Byres*, which was produced in Glasgow in 1936. Other full-length plays were, *Jamie the Saxt* (1937), *Torwatletie* (1946) and *The Flouers o Edinburgh* (1948), which explores the language problem in Scotland in the 18th century.

All these plays were mock-historical comedies which facilitated the use of a standard non-localised Scots which transcended the erosion of the language which had taken place in the current century. This language sounded familiar to Scottish people and was comprehensible wherever the plays were performed. These plays were well-crafted, and prominent roles were often splendidly acted by Duncan Macrae.

The performance of such plays and the example of Macrae, helped to produce a whole generation of fine actors in the demonstrative Scottish style, who soon familiarised themselves with the stage use of this expressive language. These plays represented an important, if limited, extension of the dramatic potential of the Scots language and they soon built up a substantial following. Until recently, occasional productions of McLellan's historical comedies are still mounted at the larger theatres in Scotland, and several actors successful in pantomime roles, such as Jimmy Logan and Walter Carr, had no difficulty in adapting to rather more serious parts in these plays.

In the period following World War II, an early priority for students at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, who aspired to a career on the stage, was to get rid of every trace of a Scottish accent and replace it with a pseudo-English accent known as received pronunciation (RP). A Scots accent with a sound system derived from the Scots language, or from Gaelic, was seen as appropriate for parochial character parts. This policy created identity problems for some Scots actors, who were so successful in deracinating themselves in order to sound English, they were sometimes refused Scottish parts on the grounds that they did not sound 'Scotch'.

This period saw a renaissance of writing poetry in Scots, inspired by the earlier example of Hugh MacDiarmid's work in the 1920s, and there was a corresponding interest in the type of Scots play popularised by McLellan. There were also spectacular revivals of *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis* at the Edinburgh International Festivals in 1948 and 1949. At this time, the Gateway Theatre in Edinburgh was an important centre for the performance of comedy plays in Scots, involving actors who had developed appropriate skills, such as John Laurie, Rikki Fulton, Roddy McMillan, Lennox Milne and James Gibson.

Other playwrights of merit who followed the example of McLellan were Robert Kemp (*Let Wives Tak Tent*, *The Other Dear Charmer*, *The Scientific Singers*, *The Laird o Grippy*) and Alexander Reid (*The Lass wi the Muckle Mou*, *The World's Wonder*). The opening of *The Lass wi the Muckle Mou*, which describes a return to the material world of the legendary Thomas the Rhymer of Ercildoune, gives an impression of this particular dramatic genre.

Twilight. The edge of a wood near Elibank. As the curtain rises, a hunting owl hoots softly and from the left enters THOMAS THE RHYMER and THE LADY IN GREEN. Thomas is dressed in a green jerkin and green hose and has a harp slung on his shoulder. THE LADY is dressed in a green skirt, velvet jacket and velvet mantle.

THE LADY: Weill, Thomas, here we are at the land o the leevin an at the land's end. A'l come nae ferrer wi ye, an A'l no byde here lang aither. The'r a snell wund blawin about the crossweys o the warld that's ill tae thole.

THOMAS: (*Taking a deep breath*) A lyke it fyne, Leddie. A'd forgot what a grund smell the earth haed til't.
(*Sniffs appreciatively*)
My, ye coud near mak a meal o it. The're green gress in't, an cous, an middenstink, an peit reik an God kens what else!

L.I.G.: The're Kirkyaird moul, Thomas. Dinna forget that! An the soor stink o the reivar's corp on the Gallows Hill. Dinna forget thaim, Thomas!

THOMAS: It's the saut o the dish, Leddie! It wad be gey wersh-tastit athoot it.
(*An owl hoots*)
Losh! Did ye hear that? Yon wes the skraich o a huntin houlet or A never heard yin! Ai, the pleisir it'l be tae gae huntin again.
Eh! but what wes that?

L.I.G.: The daith squeal o the herrit mouss whan the houlet gruppit it!
That's a gey common soond i the earth warld tae, Thomas.
An no a bonnie yin.

THOMAS: It gars ye grue tae hear it. Ach but ye'l no frichten me wi a squeekin mouss. It hings thegither, Leddie: herrit an herrier; pleisir an pain. Ye canna lowse thaim this syde o mortalitie.

L.I.G.: Na, but ye can leeve abuin thaim wi me Thomas, gin ye're wullin.

Other playwrights writing entirely in Scots were, Sydney Goodsir Smith (*The Wallace*), Robert Silver (*The Bruce*), James Scotland (*The Honours of Drumlie, The Sorcerer's Tale*), T M Watson (*Johnny Jouk the Gibbet*) and Victor Carin (*The Chippit Chantie*). Although some of these authors are in a different quality bracket from McLellan and Reid, they all wrote popular plays in credible Scots in the post-war period and the plays of the last two, Scotland and Watson, have been great favorites with amateur companies. A complete list of plays written in Scots published since 1900 was compiled by Charlotte Reid of the Scots Language Society, and this was published by Glasgow City Libraries¹². The list runs to 45 pages of A4 typescript.

Contemporaneously with Alexander Reid's work in the 1950s, we have Douglas Young's translation from the Greek of *The Puddocks* by Aristophenes. This play was actually performed during the Edinburgh Festival in the late fifties in the open air in the Braidburn Park.

More recently, we have had good plays written partly in Scots by Donald Campbell, such as *The Jesuit* and *The Widows of Clyth*, but there are now fewer plays written entirely in a genuine Scots. An exception is, *The Last of the Lairds*, a hilarious comedy adapted by Allan Sharpe from the novel by John Galt. Too many productions now seem to be translations of plays by Molière, embodying the thinking of 17th century France. For example, in recent years, we have had Hector Macmillan's translation of *Le Malade Imaginaire (The Hypochondriak)*, Liz Lochhead's translation of *Tartuffe* at the Lyceum, Edinburgh, and Robert Kemp's *The Laird o Grippy (L'Avare)* by the Biggar Theatre Workshop. Molières monsters and farces are claimed to have some peculiar affinity to the Scots language and character.

However, there is some original work which might be mentioned. The Brunton Theatre in Musselburgh for a while in the 1980s pursued a policy of producing quite a lot of new work in Scots, and in recent years, it has mounted productions of *The World Traiveller* by Donald Mackenzie, *Tamlane*, *The Cauldron & Under the Passing Stars* by Edwin Stiven, my own play, *The Knight o the Riddils* and an Edinburgh International Festival production of *The Bruce* by Robert Silver.

The Scottish Theatre Company, of course, was founded in 1981 to promote work by Scottish dramatists, with an eye to the use of the Scots language, but it was so under-funded by the Scottish Arts Council that it broke little new ground and concentrated on repeated productions of *The Thrie Estaitis*. During the 1990s, a campaign was launched by the Advisory Council for the Arts to form a National Theatre in Scotland---a phoenix from the ashes, as it were. This received qualified support from the Scottish Arts Council and this campaign has now borne fruit..

Following the lamented demise of the Scottish Theatre Company in 1986, few professional companies have been interested in producing new plays in Scots, leaving aside the unending procession of translations of Molière's plays. A notable exception was Perth Theatre's production of Joy Hendry's *Gang Doun wi a Sang*, a perceptive biographical play based on the tragic life of William Soutar.

Amateur theatre groups generally try to avoid new plays, although productions of established period pieces by Robert McLellan and his emulators are still quite common by amateur companies. At most Edinburgh Festivals, there are productions in this mold on the Fringe. We have had, to mention just a few, *The Chippit Chantie* (Victor Carin), *Johnny Jouk the Gibbet* (T M Watson), *The Lass wi the Muckle Mou* (Alexander Reid), *The Sorcerer's Tale* (James Scotland), and *The Flouers o Edinburgh* (Robert McLellan). This is a world frozen in history, of *wurthie beylies, chaumer louns, mukkil moued lassies an galluss lads that jouk gibbets whaur thay weill deserr ti be hangit*.

Within the Edinburgh area alone, in recent years, there have been several amateur theatre companies which could make a reasonable job of producing a play in Scots, and the same can be said of the Biggar Theatre Workshop. In September 1997, Ann Matheson, at the Biggar Theatre Workshop, mounted a remarkable performance of *Philotus*, the first complete production for centuries. There were abridged versions produced in Edinburgh in 1988 and 1995.

Two Edinburgh amateur companies which have regularly produced plays in Scots at the Edinburgh International Festival Fringe, are Leitheatre and the Edinburgh People's Theatre. Sadly, the Scots language in such productions is always defective to some extent. This, of course, reflects the long neglect of Scots in our schools over generations, and fragmentation and erosion of the language under the colossal pressure of English on TV and radio. As a result of the disintegration of spoken Scots under this pressure, the director and members of the cast in any production are unlikely to be familiar with many of the Scots words in any script, and some scripts may be linguistically defective for a start.

There are now always some solecisms in public performances of plays in Scots, and I have actually heard actors say things such as: *Dinna tak on so! Ye're gaun tae faur, nou! Are ye doon wi yeir denner, yit?* Scots words previously unknown to actors may be mispronounced. It takes away from the authenticity and credibility of the performance to hear *taigilt* and *warsilt* pronounced *taigit* and *warslit* because they are spelt in this unsatisfactory way in the script. There is an unfortunate misconception among some directors that Scots is a frenetic language involving growling and snarling, so that productions are marred by actors adopting this false image by bellowing or gabbling their lines. There is a big educational problem here and we are now in a position where any company producing a play in Scots would be well advised to contact an informed person for advice on the language. This being said, in the past, the theatre in Scotland has been about the only place where a visitor could go and be sure of hearing an hour of two or relatively undiluted Scots. This is a facility we are now in danger of losing forever.

In general, the state of the theatre in Scotland reflects the present provincial state of the country. Many of our principal theatres have had English artistic directors who have little knowledge of Scots and its potential for dramatic expression, and we have a tradition of pantomime where Scots is represented as a medium suitable for the *coamies*. The message projected is that Scots is a ludicrous way to talk, though good for a laugh. Mary Queen of Scots, who spoke Middle Scots and French in her lifetime, is now commonly represented on the stage by actresses quacking away in an affected English accent at what is supposed to be the Scottish Court.

Mock historical plays in Scots in the mold of *Johnny Jouk the Gibbet* were certainly an advance on a situation where Scots was not heard on the stage outside pantomime and variety shows, but many plays in this genre are mediocre and reflect historical issues which sometimes seem irrelevant to contemporary audiences. One influential drama critic has described such pieces as “mock medieval Border comedies conveying a *foustie* image of the Scots language for a whole generation of school children.” Thus we are in a situation in Scotland where, although Scots is used in drama, the standard of the Scots is very unsatisfactory and, and its use is restricted to comic or *foustie* conventional roles. The remarkable dramatic potential of the language is largely unrealised. There is now an urgent need to extend the use of Scots in the theatre into areas where its power and beauty can find expression.

In the past we have had quite a lot of dramatised social comment in demotic Scots about urban deprivation in west central Scotland. Dramatised version of *No Mean City* and Robert McLeish's *The Gorbals Story* are in this category, and at the time these were written, urban speech was more consistent than during the last two decades. Unfortunately, the Scots spoken by most people in urban areas is fragmented and heavily infiltrated with English. This makes it difficult to write a play in Scots about contemporary life in Scotland, unless of course, the play deals with drug ‘culture,’ and the disintegration of civilised life in areas of urban deprivation. In this context, language becomes almost irrelevant. An significant exercise in dramatising social commentary was the rendering in Scots from Quebecois by Bill Findlay and Martin Bowman of Michel Tremblay's play (*The Guid Sisters*) set in Montreal in 1965. This received standing ovations when produced in Toronto in the early 1990s.

It is still possible to stage valuable social commentary on disappearing aspects of Scottish cultural life, and Tony Roper's *The Steamie*, John Byrne's *The Slab Boys*, Mary Strathie's *The Dernalers*, Bill Bryden's *Willie Rough* and *The Bevellers* by Roddy McMillan, worked very well and were very popular. It is understandable that the Scots in these plays should be fragmented to some extent.

From the language of *The Steamie*, the word, *ken*, familiar in colloquial Glasgow speech before World War I, seems to have disappeared from colloquial speech altogether. In the play, *Bondagers*, by Sue Glover, (produced in Glasgow in 1991) which is a social commentary on the lives of female agricultural workers in the Borders in the nineteenth century, the language does not correspond to Border speech either in this century or the last.

The author has attempted to get over the difficulty arising from the breakdown of spoken Scots, by rendering Scottish fairy tales from the oral tradition into Scots and developing these stories into plays. These are set in a fabulous time which is conveniently out of real time, so that it is possible to use a Scots which is uncompromising and consistent. Alexander Reid ventured into this area with Thomas the Rhymer in *The Lass wi the Muckle Mou*. These tales are part of our common international heritage of folklore and they embody important psychological truths which are relevant and dramatically meaningful for adults as well as children.

The first play of this kind was *The Puddok an the Princess*¹³ and this was based on a Scottish version of the European Frog Prince story, which was referred to as long ago as 1549 in *The Complaynt of Scotland*. This play was first produced at the Edinburgh International Festival in 1985, when it won a Fringe First Award. It operates at the level of infantile psychology, which is still accessible to perceptive adults. Although essentially, this is a child's eye view, this play is not specifically aimed at children, but directed at the child in the adult---at children of all ages. The use of Scots can assist adults to recapture, to some extent, an earlier way of looking at the world. The play has now had seven professional productions by Theatre Alba, including two tours of Scotland¹³.

Two other plays of a similar kind (*The Knicht o the Riddils & Whuppitie Stourie*) have also been professionally produced. Theatre Alba now has an impressive record in focussing on plays in uncompromising Scots and it produced a version in Scots of Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* and a production of Edwin Stiven's evergreen *Tamlane*, during the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 1999.

In general, in the present century, the use of Scots on the stage has been associated with comedy and there is no reason to doubt that the language is well adapted for this purpose. However, in many plays in Scots, such as *The Widows of Clyth*, and *The Jesuit*, by Donald Campbell, for example, Scots has been effectively used for more serious dramatic purposes. Scots is not, of course associated with High Tragedy in

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the Theatre, but there is no reason to doubt that it has the linguistic resources for any dramatic situation.

It is of interest that the source of most of the plot of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* may be found recorded in Middle Scots in John Bellenden's translation in 1536, of Hector Boece 'The Chronicles of Scotland'. This is evident from the following passage:

The samyne tyme happynit ane wounerfull thing. Quhen Makbeth and Banquho war passand to Fores, quhair King Duncan wes for the tyme, thai mett be the gaitt thre weird sisteris or wiches, quhilk cam to thame with elrege clething. The first of thame sayid to Makbeth: "Hayill Thane of Glammys!" The secund sayid: "Hayill Thayn of Cawdor!" the thrid sayid: Hayill, Makbeth, that salbe sum tyme King of Scotlannd!"

Than sayid Banquho: "Quhat women be ye, quhilkis bene sa unmercifull to me and sa propiciant to my companyeoun, givand him nocht onlie landis and grete rentis bot als triumphant kingdome, and gevis me nocht" To this ansuerit the first o thir wiches: We schaw mair felicitais appering to thee than to him; for thocht he happin to be ane king, yite his empyre sall end unhappely and nane of his blude sall eftir him succede. Be contrair you sall never be king, but of ye sall com mony kings, quhilkis with lang and anciant lynage sall rejoise ye the croun of Scotland." Thir wourdis beand sayid, thai suffenlye evanyst out o thair sycht.

In 1986, after the first two productions of *The Puddok an the Princess*, it was suggested to the author that it would be a good idea to translate Shakespeare's *Macbeth* into Scots, since the action is set in Scotland, although the story bears little resemblance to the facts of Scottish history. This translation was completed in 1987 and the script was published later in 1992¹⁴ (*The Tragedie o Macbeth*, Rob Roy Press, Edinburgh 1992).

There are, of course, both gains and losses in any translation, but despite the losses, translation into Scots has the effect of injecting new life into many passages which have become clichés in this great play. It also has the effect of removing the possibility of pomposity from any production.

The famous response of *Macbeth* to the news of his wife's death is still tragic and powerful in Scots. There is nothing comic about this!

*The-morn, the-morn, an aye the-morn, foraye---!
Lufe shauchils on frae day ti day until
The end---on til the lest glisk o tyme itsell.
An aw our yestreins haes lichtit gomerils
Alang thair roads ti stourie graves.
Oot wi ye, short caunil! This lyfe's
A daunerin shaidae---a sairie actor
That strunts an rants his oor upon
The stage, an syne is heard nae mair.
It is a tale telt bi an idiot,*

Fou o feim an dirdum---but meanin naething!

The Tragedie o Macbeth was produced on the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2002 by Theatre Alba, *al fresco*, in Duddingston Kirk Gardens and the production was generally acclaimed by the critics.

THE WAY FORWARD FOR SCOTS IN DRAMA

When a play is well produced in Scots, everybody is enriched: the author, the director, the actors, everybody concerned with the production, and, of course, the audience. The use of Scots in drama opens a door for all of us. It enables us to experience a world of feeling which has a different flavor from the world of English. This is to say, our awareness is extended---and that is what art is all about.

However, whether there is any future for the use of Scots in drama, depends on the prospects of survival of Scots as a living language distinct from English. With the establishment of a Scottish Parliament in the new millennium, with responsibility for Scotland's cultural heritage, it is a reasonable expectation that it will be recognised that the Scots language is an important badge of national identity and that its erosion is a serious national problem.

This is a broad question which is the subject of a separate paper¹⁵ (*The Way Forward for the Scots Language*, Purves, 1997) in which the validity of the terms, 'good Scots' and 'bad Scots' is discussed. Here it is argued that any hope of survival of Scots as a living language will depend on its treatment in education as a separate, though related, linguistic system from English, with its own idioms, grammar, syntax and orthography¹⁵. Nine reforms are proposed, which are seen as necessary to reverse the decline of Scots and improve its status and prestige as a national language. One proposal particularly relevant to this discussion, called for the establishment of a Scottish National Theatre in these terms: 'A National Theatre for Scotland should be established, which would have as one of its functions, the provision of resources, information and advice to help directors to improve standards of authenticity in dramatic productions in Scots'. This objective was endorsed in 'The National Cultural Strategy' published by the Scottish Executive in 2000.

At the time of writing (2004), A National Theatre of Scotland has recently been established by the Scottish Executive. It is desirable that its aims should be in accordance with this objective. This is of key importance in the development of any credible National Cultural Strategy.

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