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Author: Donald Smith

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Playing National: The Scottish Experiment

Donald Smith

This paper begins with a health warning or at least disclaimer. I can make no claim to academic detachment in relation to the process through which a National Theatre of Scotland emerged.

Having been a long-standing advocate I actively coordinated the campaign for a National Theatre of Scotland between 1992 and 1997. In 1999–2000 I co-chaired a Federation of Scottish Theatre working party on the issue and, in 2000–1, I chaired the official working party established by the Scottish Arts Council (SAC) to make recommendations to government on the form and policy of a National Theatre.

Although since July 2000 the devolved government of Scotland had been committed in principle to establishing a National Theatre, the presentation of the official report in May 2001 was followed by delay; I was asked by the SAC and the theatre organisations to convene a steering group that would be responsible for overseeing arrangements until the new organisation could be established. This happened finally in early 2004, with generous governmental funding.

Although my personal involvement is now very much scaled back, I am a Board member of the new organisation, enabling in the early stages a degree of continuity with its genesis.

Some might describe this as a journey from terrorist to cabinet member. However, the reality was more complex, presenting on many fronts Yeats' 'fascination of what is difficult'. At some points I was forced reluctantly to take the stage as a public actor; at others I grappled like a dramatist with concept and plotlines while, more often, I felt like a director struggling to make the chemistry of competing personalities and interests cohere. Throughout, however, I hope that I was guided by a number of key principles that will emerge in the course of this narrative, as Scotland moved towards playing National.

Act One: National Dramas

This is not the place to rehearse the long historical quest in Scotland for some form of National Theatre.¹ It is, however, important to recognise from the outset that this long and often frustrated search was motivated by the desire for a national drama. Various points of theatrical development have been identified with the incarnation of this holy grail, ranging from the sixteenth century achievement of Sir David Lindsay to the Theatre Royal of J. H. Murray in nineteenth century Edinburgh, to the combined efforts of Glasgow's Citizens and Edinburgh's Gateway theatres in the nineteen forties and fifties.

The national drama would by definition embody in dramaturgy, acting and production styles that which is culturally and historically distinctive about Scottish society, so imposing a weight of political as well as artistic expectation on its periodic flowerings.

The scale of such expectation in its turn exposed the lack historically of any consistent tradition of playwriting in Scotland and the weakness, or often absence, of the financial, social and political support necessary to sustain the theatrical framework for a national drama.

With the onset of state support for the arts after World War II a professional theatre that was not solely swayed by commercial pressures did emerge in Scotland. But the paradox was that the new subsidised companies were more interested in the professionalisation of theatre than they were in developing a Scottish national drama.

Such competing aspirations made twentieth century Scottish theatre an arena of conflict, though also one of considerable artistic achievement. Restless natives and changing international influences sometimes clashed and sometimes coalesced in ways that seemed to chime with Scotland's own changing cultural and political circumstances.²

A guiding influence in these developments from the nineteen sixties was the Scottish Arts Council exercising the powers of state patronage with a minimum of public political accountability. But the artists could be turbulent and, from the nineteen sixties on, what happened on Scotland's public

¹ See passim. Bill Findlay (ed.), *A History of Scottish Theatre* (Edinburgh, 1995) and Donald Campbell, *Playing for Scotland: A History of the Scottish Stage 1715–1965* (Edinburgh, 1996).

² See Cairns Craig, and Randall Stevenson (eds), *Twentieth Century Scottish Drama* (Edinburgh, 2001).

stages carried an edge of creative excitement and political risk or challenge.³

In the late eighties, tensions collided around the short lived Scottish Theatre Company which had been established to tour specifically Scottish plays. At the same time, John McGrath's 7:84 Theatre Company was embroiled in political and artistic controversy as its reaction to Thatcherism became increasingly strident.

In 1987 the Advisory Council for the Arts in Scotland, an offshoot of the Saltire Society, convened a conference in Edinburgh to push the case for a National Theatre. This was addressed by national theatre directors from Finland and Iceland and also by David Daiches who eloquently expounded the literary and cultural role that a National Theatre could play in Scotland. The core argument was that these long-term objectives could not depend solely on the fluctuating choices of individual artistic directors or the financial fates of individual theatre companies; there had to be a sustaining cultural policy if the full artistic potential of Scottish theatre were to be realised.

The conference was attended by approximately two hundred people and sign-posted increasing support among actors, writers, technicians, individual directors and literary commentators for a National Theatre.

However, the key funders, The Scottish Arts Council for central government and local authorities, remained unmoved. Then, in 1992, under its new director Seona Reid, The Scottish Arts Council, in partnership with other national cultural bodies and local government, launched the largest ever public consultation on culture to be undertaken – the Charter for the Arts in Scotland. This reported a strong desire on the part of audiences to see more Scottish drama and, in consequence, a working party was established in 1993 to examine the feasibility of 'a National Theatre resource'.

Act Two: Stalemate

Able chaired by Professor Sally Brown of Stirling University, the working party revealed a chasm between representatives of the theatre, artists and public bodies on the one hand, and the existing theatre managements on the other. The first group favoured the cultural, educational and potentially economic benefits of a National Theatre to Scotland. The latter portrayed a National Theatre as centralising, potentially conservative and, in a narrow sense, nationalistic.

³ Bill Findlay (ed.), *Scots Plays of the Seventies* (Edinburgh, 2001)

It was, of course, also perceived as a funding threat to an already struggling theatre sector.

However, the Charter process followed by the working party sparked significant public interest, and an active campaign for a National Theatre was set in motion. This campaign was effectively an alliance between the Advisory Council for the Arts in Scotland (with the Saltire Society behind it) and Equity. It was based in my office at the tiny Netherbow Theatre in Edinburgh's Royal Mile.

One of the first actions of the campaign was to publish a list, first of one then of two hundred modern Scottish plays.⁴ This was intended initially to scotch the argument from ignorance that Scotland had no dramatic tradition on which to base a National Theatre but it had, in the event, a much wider impact. The list demonstrated not just the vitality of Scottish theatre but its artistic and linguistic diversity. The relative neglect of Scottish writers by the theatre institutions as a whole (there were notable exceptions) was exposed, but so was the argument that a National Theatre need be narrow or nationalistic.

The playlist received wide and sympathetic press coverage. The public argument for a National Theatre was won in 1993–4 in a way that offered a potentially unifying artistic case. Yet the institutional politics remained in gridlock and, despite Sally Brown's best efforts, the working party ended in stalemate. Its deliberations evoked an SAC promise to create an undefined 'National Theatre Resource'. This promise was never acted upon and the working party's report remained unpublished.

Act Three: Enter Devolution Stage Left

The context of this stalemate was dramatically altered by the Devolution Referendum of 1997 with its positive vote for the establishment of a Scottish Parliament. This was followed with the Scotland Act of 1998 and the first Scottish election in 1999. Among the many consequences of these events was direct democratic and political accountability for governmental public bodies such as The Scottish Arts Council.

The new Parliament's Standing Committee on Education, Culture and Sport instituted an early inquiry into Scotland's national performing arts

⁴ See Donald Smith (ed.), *The Scottish Stage: A National Theatre Company for Scotland*, 36–46 (Edinburgh, 1994).

companies, including the non-existent national theatre. The paradox that Scotland possessed a national opera company, orchestras and a national ballet but no national institution for its socially rooted theatre appeared glaring. In fact, from this point the National Theatre seemed to attain its own 'virtual reality' in public and media perceptions.

The existing theatre managements thought quickly on their feet. Some artistic directors such as Kenny Ireland of Edinburgh's Royal Lyceum, were long-standing supporters of 'national drama', but all could recognise that new public investment might depend on resolving the paradox. Led by their Chair Hamish Glen of Dundee Rep, the Federation of Scottish Theatre appeared at a parliamentary hearing to pledge their support for a National Theatre that would be created by combining the best artistic achievements of the existing theatre companies. As the Parliamentary Committee proceeded towards a positive recommendation on creating a National Theatre, the Federation hastily convened a working party to flesh out their new idea.

I was invited to join the Federation working party as a member who had actively participated in the public campaign and I chaired most of the meetings. Strong personalities were involved and differing emphases, but it was clear that a National Theatre, which commissioned work from the existing theatre companies for both touring and site specific productions, commanded majority support. For some this was a case enthusiastically espoused; for others it was a matter of the least worst option. The process was more political than practical but nonetheless necessary to prevent squabbling disunity spiking the external case. The Working Party's conclusion was duly presented to the Scottish Arts Council and to government. Some of those who had fronted the campaign, such as Paul Scott of the Saltire Society, did not see the Federation's proposal as the best way forward.

Act Four: Squaring the Circles

The Scottish Arts Council was now left in a delicate position. Despite the Charter process of 1992–3 and the subsequent working party, it had blown cold on the idea of a National Theatre, confident that there was little support among its client theatres. At heart the Arts Council did not want another troublesome and expensive national company that had to be resourced and placated. Now, however, the Scottish Arts Council had new political masters and the theatre sector pushing its federal proposal. At the same time the Arts

Council was acutely aware of the overall financial weaknesses of the existing theatre infrastructure, as well as its inconsistent standards.

With the agreement of the Scottish Executive, the SAC opted for a further, more widely representative Working Party that would be charged with examining potential models and making detailed recommendations based on feasibility rather than aspiration

The resultant committee, which I also chaired, embraced competing views of what a National Theatre of Scotland should be. So the task was to build consensus and to model something that had a realistic hope of succeeding in the real world. It had become necessary to chart the process by which the National Theatre which was now a betting likelihood, could move from virtual reality to operational capacity.

The Working Party had its own very capable independent administration, in the shape of Morag Ballantyne, and was therefore able to carve out its own strategy. We agreed that this should be founded on the widest possible consultation and that it should seek to articulate, from first principles, the need for a National Theatre. Only then would we proceed to recommending an appropriate model.

The needs quickly emerged:

- to provide sustainable career patterns for writers, actors and other theatre professionals in Scotland
- to provide a coherent interface between theatre and education at all levels
- to increase international profile
- to reach the parts of Scotland that were not included in present theatre provision, and all age groups
- to harness and celebrate the collective memory and achievement of Scottish theatre
- to provide a laboratory of experiment for Scottish ideas and identities in the twenty-first century
- to revitalise theatre in its relationship with changing Scottish audiences.

The campaign for a National Theatre had argued that these needs were best met by a permanent theatre ensemble. I had supported and articulated that idea in earlier essays.⁵ The Federation of Scottish Theatre argued for a whole that would be the sum of the parts.

⁵ See Smith (ed.), *The Scottish Stage*: 13–18 and 22–29.

Through the consultation process and the ongoing debate I personally became convinced that no single theatre building or company could meet the challenge. At the same time I felt strongly that a National Theatre would need to create new combinations and chemistries and not solely depend on existing theatre configurations for future challenges. It would need full creative freedom to initiate and develop, while using commissions, collaborations and studio or site specific experiments as its methodologies for sustained creative development.

Though sometimes frayed at the edges, a consensus formed around these principles and detailed work was undertaken to demonstrate that this was feasible, given adequate investment. All else depended on this because, if the new model did not attract genuinely new investment, then it could not achieve things which were not possible for the existing theatre ecology; it might, in fact, diminish or undermine what Scotland had already.

The report was published in May 2001⁶ and widely welcomed. We now had an agreed model and plan; could funding be secured to translate it into action?

Act Five: Delayed Gratification

A two year delay ensued. The Scottish Arts Council welcomed and approved the Working Party's recommendations, while signalling anxiety about the financial health of the present infrastructure. The report calculated that the National Theatre needed £3.5m of new annual investment, but the Scottish Executive had set aside £1.5m to establish a National Theatre.

In the event, that money was diverted to the existing theatres. As a Scottish election loomed in 2003 the then culture minister, Mike Watson, fell out of political favour due to his support for a campaign against hospital closures in Glasgow.

This is the part of a long difficult process for which I can claim some personal credit. The rest was responding objectively to process and need. There was a huge temptation at this point, egged on by a supportive press, to attack the Scottish Executive for prevarication but I refused to do this. Instead, in my new role as Chair of the National Theatre Steering Committee, I publicly sympathised with the need to invest in the existing theatres while urging the

⁶ *Scottish National Theatre: Report of the Independent Working Party* (Edinburgh, 2001).

politicians to honour their pledge to establish the National Theatre. As a theatre historian I knew in my bones that it was better to have no National Theatre than one without the means to be successful.

In due course, patience was rewarded and, at the end of 2003, Richard Findlay was appointed Chair of the National Theatre with an initial budget of £3.5m. A Board was quickly formed and in 2004 Vicky Featherstone was appointed the Artistic Director.

It took a further year to establish the full staff team with its first commissions, projects and education programme. In February 2006 an ambitious artistic programme was launched for the year ahead, with ten site specific theatre events across Scotland under the theme of 'home'.

Postscript

This is not the place or time to evaluate the new artistic programme or to begin to measure the achievements of the National Theatre of Scotland against its original objectives. A promising start has been made, but plenty of legitimate debate remains to be had about methodology and purpose. The National Theatre of Scotland is clearly an experiment and its value will lie on what both its failures and successes will tell us about the future.

It is my own belief that the National's overall success depends on recognising the social, cultural and political roots from which the new institution has emerged. If its artistic innovations can respond to these contexts and not solely to cultural fashions, then the foundations of genuine artistic achievement have been laid, not just for Scotland but for drama as a truly international artform. Scotland's writers will be central to that process.

What this account confirms is the socio-political character of theatre as an artform, both in its organisation and creative process, and in its sensitivity or perhaps exposure to context. For my own part, I wish that the theatre community had been able to lead the way into devolution with an innovative National Theatre imagining Scotland's futures, just as theatre had maintained a space for creative resistance during the years of minority Conservative rule in Scotland. The historical reality is that devolution set the pace for change in the theatre sector.

I hope that what was brokered has preserved the space for creative experiment, and for the expression of diverse national dramas which explore past and present, and look to the future, without predetermining outcomes. That might

be a model for participative democracy in the twenty first century as well as theatrical collaboration.

Netherbow Theatre, Edinburgh