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More to Come: Forty Years of the Scottish Society of Playwrights

In the autumn of 1973 a group of around twenty-five playwrights gathered in an upper room at the Netherbow Theatre in Edinburgh. Called by a circular sent out by Ena Lamont Stewart, Hector MacMillan and John Hall, the meeting grew out of a sense of frustration among Scottish playwrights with existing methods of dealing with theatre managements, settling fees and supporting new writing. Several of those who attended were members of the Writers Guild which at that time seemed very much focused on other forms of writing and, so far as drama was concerned, with broadcast media and film; some had recently broken through into being produced onstage but, despite their success, shared the view that some fresh initiative was needed to develop support for playwriting and to act as a new channel for playwrights to speak collectively.

One might have expected that the debate in the room would be passionate. It was. But it was not self-centred, or not very. It was primarily concerned for the future of Scottish theatre, and playwriting within it, arising from a perception that there was in many Scottish theatres a lack of proper concern for new writing. The Traverse, now rightly seen as the national new writing company, was then far from committed to new writing, let alone Scottish new writing. Its artistic director Mike Ockrent, like his predecessor Mike Rudman, seemed more interested in possible West End links or presenting European classics. And while the Citizens was undoubtedly producing work of high quality, at that stage it was showing no interest in producing new writing, let alone new Scottish work (though it was soon to nurture the work of Robert David Macdonald). One playwright actually walked out of the

meeting in protest at the suggestion that the Citizens, set up to support *inter alia* new writing, might not be fulfilling its original remit. In fact no one had objected to the aesthetic of the Citizens' artistic director Giles Havergal, or contested his right to develop his own artistic policy – the issue was how to secure a proper place in Scottish theatre for new Scottish writing. To this end, the meeting resolved to establish a society of playwrights dedicated to supporting theatre and playwriting in Scotland. The priorities identified that night remain enshrined in the Scottish Society of Playwrights' constitution, as does its overarching intent: 'to promote the development and production of theatre-making in Scotland and to act for playwrights in Scotland in all matters affecting them'.

The model for the Society's organisation – brought to the meeting's attention, as I recall, by Hector MacMillan – was that of the recently formed Society of Irish Playwrights. The meeting agreed that the way forward was to found a Society with a similar remit, set about creating a committee to steer its foundation. To my astonishment, Ena Lamont Stewart – whom I had never met until that day – proposed me as Chair on the grounds that 'this young man sitting in front of me seems to talk some sense'. Such was her prestige in that room that her proposal was carried *nem con*, although in retrospect I cannot help thinking that, given the work to be undertaken, my colleagues were pleased someone was so gullible as to take on the role. I was then just twenty-eight with only three or four significant productions, although two had been at the Royal Lyceum and another for the Edinburgh Festival.

Given that we had adopted the Irish model, someone suggested that the new organisation should be called the 'Society of Scottish Playwrights'. I offered the thought that this might seem a little exclusive – how would we define 'Scottish', by residence, or birth, or what? A consensus emerged that we should create a 'Scottish Society of Playwrights' – that is, one working for the interests of Scotland, welcoming any playwright working in Scotland; as well as those who perceived themselves as Scottish working furth of the country. The qualification for full membership of the Society remains the same to this day:

open to Scots playwrights, wherever resident, or playwrights resident in Scotland, who wish to promote their work in the theatre, and who have written substantial texts requiring the services of actors for performance

in the theatre/radio/television/film and who have had at least one such text publicly and professionally performed.

The committee charged with drafting the constitution comprised Hector MacMillan, Ada F. Kay and myself. We circulated draft after draft among ourselves till we had one we felt ready to bring to the members – and after two members’ drafting meetings, late in 1973 the constitution was established. To manage the Society’s affairs, a Council was established whose first members included – besides Ena Lamont Stewart, Ada F. Kay, Hector MacMillan, John Hall and me – well-established playwrights like Joan Ure and Donald Mackenzie.

Under this Council’s guidance, the SSP quickly became recognised as a co-ordinated voice for playwrights, an advocate of the value of a healthy Scottish theatre, and a playwriting development and promotional agency. One of its first initiatives was to set up workshops to develop new plays on the model of the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center’s US National Playwrights’ Conference in Connecticut. We also wanted to develop information and publishing strands to our operation. Within six months of our foundation we obtained a grant of £10,000 from the Scottish Arts Council. In this, we were facilitated by the encouragement of the SAC’s Drama Director, John Faulkner, perhaps the most progressive and creative individual to have held that post, and its dynamic Director, Sandy Dunbar. To put that grant in perspective, in 2010 terms it equated under the Retail Prices Index to £94,300 and under the Average Earnings Index to £153,000. It is hard to see how, in contemporary conditions, a body of artists less than six months old could achieve such levels of support, however high its members’ standing. Those were different times and for the first twelve years of its existence the SSP received SAC funding annually.

This funding meant that, besides such tasks as negotiating the first national contract for playwrights with the Federation of Scottish Theatre and representing playwrights in dispute with theatre managements, the Society could be act as a major development agency for playwrights, and in those early years it was also very active in pressing for the Traverse to be a new writing theatre. Without the SSP’s advocacy the Traverse might have chosen a new writing ethos, but perhaps not – there was resistance to the SSP campaign from those who took the attitude that European writing must be, *ipso facto*, ‘international’, and Scottish writing, however internationalist in outlook or

dramatic influence must be, *ipso facto*, 'parochial'. It is a mark of how thinking has changed, not least under the impact of the work of the SSP, that today one rarely, if ever, hears such a cringing adjective applied to contemporary Scottish theatre or its new writing.

It was not until the arrival of Chris Parr in the mid-1970s that the Traverse, with the general support of theatre-lovers, dedicated itself to new work as a central focus of its operation. The SSP model of playwrights' workshops evolved – it is now recognised and used throughout the UK (I have written in detail elsewhere¹ of the generational succession – from the O'Neill original, through the SSP in the 1970s – that meant that English bodies adopted the Scottish model, initially developed in England in 1982 through the North West Playwrights' Workshops). It is no exaggeration to say that every playwright development agency now operating in England, Wales and Northern Ireland is directly descended from the initial experiments of the SSP in the period 1974 to the mid-1980s. Indeed, the SSP's overall 1970s operational model is in many ways replicated by Playwrights' Studio Scotland, a phenomenon we will come to later.

It is worth noting how quickly the SSP, at first regarded with suspicion by theatre managements – what were those pesky playwrights up to? – became a focus of exemplary collaboration. After all, the SSP's first aim always was the good of Scottish theatre at large, for without that, how can any playwright hope to benefit adequately? The SSP-FST contract was drawn up by a theatre director, Stephen MacDonald, working collaboratively with a playwright, Hector MacMillan. MacDonald's new writing policies as Director at Dundee Rep (1973–76) and at the Royal Lyceum (1976–79) are legendary for bringing major writers to main stages – at the Lyceum, as much as a third of his programme comprised new Scottish plays. He was committed to fostering a healthy playwriting environment, understanding just how fundamental it is to a healthy theatre culture. The SSP-FST contract recognises that the need for adequate working conditions and, for example, rehearsal attendance payments are as necessary for playwrights as they are for actors. It prevails as the national standard minimum terms agreement in Scotland.

In the 1970s and early 1980s the SSP published important but neglected texts such as Roddy MacMillan's *All in Good Faith*, offered members at-cost copying, and published a newsletter which developed in time into *Scottish Theatre News*. Its first administrator, Linda Haase, and her successor, Charles

Hart, both provided outstanding service; Linda went on to help found the Tron Theatre and Charles became a legendary New Writing Officer of the Arts Council in England for over fifteen years from the late 1980s.

Around 1980 the SSP took a fateful decision for the best of reasons, but with ambivalent results. Despite opposition from longstanding members and senior figures including Eddie Boyd and Donald Mackenzie, it was decided to follow the example of the radical Theatre Writers Union in England and extend associate membership to playwrights who were not yet professionally produced. This was intended to encourage and support developing playwrights. Boyd and Mackenzie argued that, while that was an admirable objective, such a decision would dilute the impact of the SSP as the professional organisation for professional playwrights. Nonetheless, what seemed the more inclusive decision was made and associate membership was instituted.

The unintended consequence was that inexperienced playwrights with free access to SSP copying and script-binding facilities identical to that previously enjoyed only by experienced professionals started to flood theatres with their scripts. The arrival of a new script in the SSP binding had come to signify that work of a certain quality could be anticipated but there now came a wave of submissions that did nothing to enhance the prestige of that livery. SSP workshops open to experienced and inexperienced playwrights alike were clearly developmental and, in a sense, experimental, and so they might reasonably present work that was less than successful – but there were very different implications when a script in the SSP binding could not be immediately trusted to be worth considering. SSP publications continued to offer a wide service to Scottish theatre. *Scottish Theatre News* earned a feisty reputation for not pulling its punches, which did not always make it popular with some theatre folk or funders but the general opinion was that it was none the worse for that. However, the move to extend the copying service to less than fully achieved plays and allow them to emerge into the market under the SSP's aegis led to an erosion of confidence in the SSP's standards.

Having served as Chair between 1973 and 1975, I was re-elected in 1984 at a time when Arts Councils north and south of the Border were reconsidering their priorities. In England, the notorious *Glory of the Garden* strategy report was threatening the survival of many theatre organisations, although the Arts Council did pull back from its most foolish proposals. (Indeed, when I served

between 1986 and 1994 as Drama Director in England, part of my time was engaged in undoing some of the harm *The Glory of the Garden* had caused.) The SAC produced its own version of *The Glory of the Garden*, presenting a rethink of its funding priorities and proposing the withdrawal of funding from what it called ‘support services’ in favour of ‘direct provision’.

As it happened, one of the first letters I received after election in June 1984 was from the SAC. I thought it must be a letter of congratulations but when I opened it I saw it was notification of intention to withdraw funding of the SSP from 1985. Despite widespread protests from the theatre profession north and south of the Border the SAC persisted in its intent, impervious to the fact that support for playwrights through the SSP was in fact direct provision. In 1985 the SSP had to close down its workshop, publishing and copying activities – at the time we predicted that the SAC would come to miss the Society’s wide-ranging services and would seek a way of recreating them. Meantime, the SSP concentrated on its primary role of representing the playwrights of Scotland. While the Society’s funding had more or less kept pace with its level when first granted, only part of its funding went to provide a post of Literary Director (Scotland), which was filled by Tom McGrath. He brilliantly executed the role of developing young playwriting talent, acting as mentor and dramaturg for them.

It has to be said that in the light of these upheavals some discussion circled the question of the continuing viability of the SSP. As Chair I argued – along with many members, including, prominently, Peter Arnott, who had recently joined – that we still could have a vibrant future and represent the interests of playwrights. In order to fulfil the role of a professional union, we realised we had to withdraw the category of associate member. In effect, from being a development agency in the way we operated, the SSP became a union and was soon to join the STUC, of which it remains a member, one its smaller unions.

This shift of focus opened interesting new avenues of operation. In 1986, as the SSP negotiator I joined forces with representatives of the Writers’ Guild and Theatre Writers’ Union in establishing our first national agreement with the Theatrical Management Association for the benefit of Scottish playwrights presenting work in England and Wales. The SSP remains a co-signatory to this agreement and in 2010–11 was involved in renegotiating its terms and confirming the extended life of the agreement, which sits

alongside and with equal status to the SSP-FST national agreement.

A second new avenue was taken forward by Chris Hannan, my successor as Chair after I stood down in 1987: a survey was sent out to members to establish the average length of time that was involved in writing a play because the level of commission fees had slipped in the inflationary times since the mid-1970s and by the late 1980s the standard rate was approximately £2,400. Taking into account the range of individual practice, the survey revealed that the writing of a play required around nine months. Setting this against the income of other theatre workers, it seemed indefensible that nine months' work should generate such a low fee for playwrights but negotiations failed to achieve a substantial increase in the commissioning fee and in 1991 the SSP called a playwrights' strike. Although our claim for a commission fee of £6,000 was regarded in some quarters as an extraordinary request, the impact of the refusal of Scottish playwrights to submit scripts to Scottish theatres concentrated minds; it soon came to be recognised that there had been excessive erosion of rates over the years and a fee of £5,500 was settled on. After the changes instituted in the mid-1980s and its successively negotiation of the TMA contract in 1985–86, the SSP had clearly established itself as the voice of playwrights' interests in Scotland and it went on representing the interests of playwrights throughout Scotland and abroad, maintaining positive relations with theatre management organisations north and south of the Border. The SSP has always been more than simply a negotiating body. For example, it held a conference in Inverness for northern-based playwrights (1999), produced the first authoritative directory of Scottish playwrights (2001) and in 2005 mounted the successful Gathering of Playwrights at the Gateway Theatre. At the Gathering, organised by the late Bill Findlay, several generations of Scottish playwrights reviewed developments in Scottish theatre since 1973 and a popular DVD recording of proceedings was subsequently published.

By the turn of the century the impact of Tom McGrath's fine work as Literary Manager was recognised and there was a surge of debate as to the best way to carry forward playwright support and development. As predicted back in 1984, it had become necessary to 'reinvent' the SSP's development programmes – or at least find ways of fulfilling most of their functions by other means. In 2000 SAC Drama Officer Nikki Axford produced an options appraisal, drawing on a reallocation of the funding of Tom McGrath's post

and seeking additional funding. Tom McGrath himself was fully involved in this process, which led to further consultations over the next two years. As part of those, a small working party that included the Drama Director David Taylor (Nikki Axford having moved on in 2001 to become Chief Executive of Pitlochry Festival Theatre), Tom McGrath, Philip Howard of the Traverse Theatre, and, from the SSP, Peter Arnott and myself met regularly to consider ways forward. We had the example of the SSP's pre-1985 and the O'Neill Center's long-time work always on the table. The SAC then employed Faith Liddell, a former Director of the Edinburgh International Book Festival, to consult further with playwrights, theatre companies and educational institutions. From these cumulative discussions, Playwrights' Studio Scotland emerged in 2004.

The SSP, with its clearly defined representative role for the profession, mainly in negotiations, public debate and union representational matters, has enjoyed excellent relations with the Playwrights' Studio, which has a developmental, mentoring and advocacy role. For example, in the mid-2000s the SSP, led by Nicola McCartney, negotiated with managements across Scotland best practice guidelines for dramaturgs; these now stand as a model for the rest of the UK. It also reached an agreement with the National Theatre of Scotland, when it was established, on playwrights' remuneration. It continued to represent the interests of playwrights as body, making submissions to the Cultural Commission and contributing fully, both as a body and through individual members, to the debate about the founding of Creative Scotland and to the more recent debate about that body's conduct of its business. For its part, the Playwrights' Studio has established a lively programme of activities that serves Scottish theatre and its playwrights outstandingly. Both organisations work in harmony, recently coming together to prepare hard evidence for the 2012 Theatre Review for Creative Scotland, led by Christine Hamilton, which has been widely welcomed for its rigour and honesty. It is striking that the first two major things it found to celebrate about Scottish theatre were that:

- New work is the lifeblood of Scottish theatre – often, although not always, this starts with the playwright;
- Scottish theatre has an international reach – again usually with new work.

The international reputation of Scottish theatre, not to mention the prominence and quality of its new work and its playwrights has been consistently supported and developed by the SSP. Over the last four decades the SSP, launched in that upstairs room at the Netherbow, has served Scottish theatre well. Its work is widely known abroad and it is unquestionably the collective representative voice of playwrights in Scotland. Over the years, however, the SSP has not only been involved in playwright support in formal ways. It has a reputation for lacking self-importance – as Peter Arnott put it in a recent (23 January) email

the social aspect of the society has been very important. We've always welcomed the stranger and made them even stranger by association... writing is a lonely business, and part of our job has always been support for individuals as individuals... not just as writers...

The inclusiveness Peter Arnott identifies is important: members include not just Scotland's major playwrights, but many of the rising generation. The Society also recognises the giants on whose shoulders contemporary Scottish playwrights stand. Since the mid-1970s, it has appointed as lifetime Honorary Presidents, senior playwrights whose work has changed the face of Scottish theatre, the first two being Robert McLellan and Ena Lamont Stewart and the current Honorary President being Hector MacMillan. Yet the SSP does not rest on its laurels. Last September the Society raised funding from Creative Scotland for two weeks of translation workshops in Glasgow. Under the title *Translating Texts: Transforming Potential*, Alan Mackendrick worked with German translator Kevin Rittberger on his recently produced *Finished with Engines* and Catherine Grosvenor with Polish translator Grzegorz Stosz on her *Gabriel*. This project, again with the co-operation of the Playwrights' Studio, allowed the scripts to be explored and translated with a view to production in mainland Europe.

Such public activities, complementing the SSP's negotiation and representative functions, continue, and in the week of 8 April 2013 at the Traverse Theatre, the SSP – in association with the Traverse and the Saltire Society – will present five days of events marking its fortieth and the Traverse's fiftieth anniversaries. Each day from Monday to Thursday, events curated respectively by myself, Peter Arnott, Nicola McCartney and Douglas Maxwell

will cover a decade of the SSP's existence. Panels of playwrights, practitioners and observers will provide an overview of the work of that decade and each day will conclude with a playreading of a play, chosen by Orla McLoughlin, that was premièred at the Traverse in the relevant period. Rounding off this exploration and celebration of the last forty years of playwriting in Scotland, the Friday event, sponsored by the Saltire Society, will debate the future of playwriting in Scotland. Clearly as it heads into its fifth decade, the SSP continues to look upwards, outwards and forwards.

Notes

1. Ian Brown, 'Playwrights' workshops of the Scottish Society of Playwrights, the Eugene O'Neill Center and their long term impact in the UK', *International Journal of Scottish Theatre and Screen* 4.2 (2011), pp. 35-50 at <http://journals.qmu.ac.uk/index.php/IJOSTS/article/view/135/pdf>