

Theatre in scotland- an underestimated force essay



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‘ The Greeks believed that it was a citizen’s duty to watch a play. It was a kind of work in that it required attention, judgement, patience, all social virtues.’”

Although this is a statement taken from a contemporary English play, this reading of Plato and Aristotle may very well also be applied to Scotland, for which its “ rich, lively theatrical tradition [...] has played a significant part in the country’s cultural development.” 2 .

Tracing the history of Scottish theatre, to compare it to the history of the development of the Scottish nation as well as a Scottish national identity seems therefore to be interesting.

The Scottish people have at all times been confident and proud of their country and identified with it as a nation. But it took them more than 300 years to finally achieve a status of partial autonomy. It may be assumed that Scottish culture, such as traditions, arts and also the theatre have offered a forum to obtain the necessary confidence and idealism that has finally led to the status of independence from England.

I will try to prove that this connection exists and show that a nation can only develop and survive if it provides cultural diversity for its people and that on the other hand, culture can only survive if not only the people, but also politics create a forum for national inheritance.

2. Scottish Drama

In order to trace the development of Scottish theatre, the first step to be made is the distinction between drama and theatre.

In any civilisation drama and theatre have always been closely connected, while it may in this case be said, that “ Scottish drama has dominated Scottish theatre’s development” 3.

2. 1 The History of Scottish Drama

The history of Scottish drama is long, but “ intermittent” 4 and may be divided into three main areas in which it has developed.

The mid- 15th to the 16th century marks the first period of this development with its high point in 1542: travelling players performed a series of ‘ morality plays’ that were often highly critical of the pre- Reformation church. The period was followed by a decline of the dramatic tradition in the 17th century, which was then again followed by another period of growth with the wake of the Scottish Enlightenment in the 18th century. Alongside with the building of the first Scottish theatres, new Scottish plays such as Allan Ramsay’s *The Gentle Shepherd* were written, while in the 19th century, in another period of decline Scottish arts withdrew into celtic myth the *Kailyard* and *tartany*.

In the latest period, which began with the wake of the Scottish Literary Renaissance in the early 20th century, two “ often complementary traditions” 5 are to be noticed. In addition to the conventional theatre tradition, a second movement, which is still highly influential nowadays, came into being, with the emerge of Scottish popular, political and working class theatre companies.

2. 2 Contemporary Scottish Drama

The described development of Scottish drama, especially in the 20th century, has been under the high influence and domination of what may be seen as two major concerns, that are also to be put in the context of the nation's development.

The wish to be independent is for example to be found, along the concept of a Scottish National Theatre, in the felt urge to create a native dramatic tradition. This has led to two different movements: Scottish playwrights, as well as directors, designers and performers on the one hand, turned inward to their national culture and experience and at the same time outward to alternative international models.

A second concern is then to be found in the matter of Scottish playwriting. The low number of actually Scottish plays has led to the awareness that there is a need to produce a body of Scottish dramatic literature which is tried to be achieved in the great "proliferation of playwrights and plays" 6 that is still a characteristic of Scottish drama.

One outcome of this encouragement are 'Scottish historical dramas', which were often "historically vague and sentimental" and concerned with almost worn-out topics of national concern. This fashion was followed by the 'Kailyard dramas', "rural romances and comedies, concerning minor events in the lives of rather two-dimensional, Lowland, village folk", which arose during the 19th century, but remained popular during the 20th century. In their plays about real urban, industrial, working class life and conditions, popular political working class theatre companies did offer the only alternative to this, while today, Scottish playwrights do write about a

wider range of topics and are not too much concerned with national issues anymore.

3. Scottish Theatre

As well as Scottish drama, “ the Scottish theatre tradition has developed in an irregular and intermittent fashion” 7 and although the distinction between drama and theatre has been made, and it may be said that.

But nevertheless, the recourse to other theatrical forms has contributed a lot to the Scottish theatre’s development, which may be seen in the fact that “ the Scottish people have at all times retained a basic, native love for popular forms of theatrical and musical entertainment” 8.

3. 1 The History of Scottish Theatre

Theatrical entertainment has always been important in Scottish court life, but since Alexander II. banned plays and banquets from court in 1214, until 1603 theatrical performances have especially been notified as performances in the royal household.

Until the Cromwellian invasion in the middle of the 17th century, theatrical performances can be grouped into four distinct types:

Performances at court did often serve a diplomatic function and were meant to be “ recreation and entertainment” 9 for royal courtiers, while performances of state as well as national celebrations usually served as the most lavish, public theatrical display.

Along these two forms, there were performances controlled by the church that were part of natural religious observance and merely of devotional nature and folk plays that were linked to the natural cycles of rural, as well as urban life of these times.

While the Catholic Church did encourage religious performances, it tried to ban folk play- performances from the churchyard and from performing on Sundays. Although major parts of the cleric did have a rather hostile attitude towards theatrical entertainment, folk plays were still tolerated after the Reformation and the Scottish nobility, as well as learning institutions did encourage it. While all these productions were of amateur nature, there had already been beginnings of professional theatre in Edinburgh at the beginning of the century, that had nevertheless also been shattered by the ban of all theatrical diversions from the British Isles in 1640, so that with the re-opening of the theatres at the return of Charles II. in 1660, "theatres almost had to be reinvented" 10.

Along with the building of its theatre in 1662, Edinburgh became known as "the Athens of the North" 11. Political changes at the end of the 17th century made regular, professional theatre more and more difficult, and while "Amateur and folk theatre continued", the importance of touring theatre companies grew. With the opening of a semi-permanent theatre in 1715 and the Edinburgh Theatre Royal in 1767, Edinburgh has been able to hold its dominating status until the middle of the 19th century.

As the taste for professional theatre and the number of communities willing to support it grew, more and more theatres, especially in the urban, working class centres of the country opened.

The music halls and also the variety theatres did rise especially in the crowded and impoverished areas of Scottish cities and opened ways for Scottish pantomime, as well as the variety, which is still a characteristic.

The theatres in the city centres did mostly contribute to the 'London- taste', the stages in the smaller towns or in the countryside, as well as the touring companies, produced plays in their own Scottish language, accents, Scottish music, song and dance.

At the beginning of the 20th century, touring companies, especially from London, still dominated, what was seen as 'real theatre', so that the opening of Glasgow Repertory Theatre in 1909 with actually own productions is to be seen as a major step in the development of a theatre, finally independent from London and was followed by a large number of new theatres during the 20th century.

The yearly Edinburgh International Festival, first held in 1947 did then contribute to international recognition of Scottish theatre.

Along with this Scottish conventional theatre tradition, a second often complementary tradition came into being with the growing importance of popular, political working class theatre companies.

During the 1970s, Scotland did once more experience an expansion in the number of theatres, companies and buildings that were funded during those

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times and helped to improve the theatrical provision and infrastructure of the country. Although this movement was not to be kept up during the 1980s, there was still optimism to be noticed in the funding of theatre and culture by the Scottish Arts Council, that is still kept up today.

3. 2 Contemporary Scottish Theatre

Tracing the history of on the one hand the development of Scottish drama and on the other hand the development of Scottish theatre in general, it has become quite clear that drama has certainly influenced the theatre, but also that contemporary Scottish theatre is to a great amount dependent on the theatrical tradition.

In his study of Scottish theatre history, Cameron claims, that “ In many ways the typical contemporary Scottish play, if such a thing exists, will ramble, be based round songs, sketches and direct audience address and owe more to the national dramas of the early nineteenth century than to Chekov, Brecht or Pinter.” 12

This does of course show the importance of both factors, drama and theatre, in the development, but the characterisation of a contemporary play as dominated by “ songs, sketches and direct audience address” stresses the often denied strong influence of theatrical practice.

All theatres that opened from the beginning of the 19th century were confronted with the fact, that only a Theatre Royal with governmental permission, was allowed to produce spoken drama, so that these new theatres had to concentrate on musical theatre. They concentrated on

favourite national airs, dances, Highlanders, bagpipe- music and tartans and put themselves “ in the service of national sentiment” 13. At the beginning of the 19th century, most of these new theatres were “ catering of the new urban working class” and tried to serve this kind of audience, while the Theatres Royal concentrated on entertaining the middle classes, contributing to so called “ London- taste”. As a result of this, the “ pantomimes and variety programmes formed the national theatre of Scotland” 14, which can still be proven by the fact that Scottish drama and therefore the theatre are still dominated by working- class playwrights that have been able to “ develop a unique and distinctive style, unencumbered by any notion of the well- made play” 15.

4. Theatre and National Inheritance

The awareness that all these movements have actually come from “ the Scottish people” that “ have at all times retained a basic, native love for popular forms of theatrical and musical entertainment” 16 leads to the assumption that the Scottish theatre is deeply connected with the Scottish culture.

4. 1 Theatre and Politics

The arts are said to be an “ essential component of a comprehensive and inclusive education and contribute to the development of a informed, confident, creative, critical and thoughtful citizenship” 17 and especially “ theatrical and dramatic elements are present in every society, no matter how complex or sophisticated it is” 18.

The country's geography has played an important part in the development, because the small population is spread over a relatively wide area, concentrated in large cities and towns, but also scattered in remote, rural areas. This explains the tradition of touring theatre companies all over the country, but also that if there was actually something that could be called a "theatrical boom", it did only last until the arrival of the cinema.

Other reasons for drama and theatre not to be the dominating art forms may be that "Drama is relatively costly [...] and for full development it has always required the economic base of court and city." 19, while one typically Scottish dilemma has certainly been the fact, that "On no other art [...] has English influence been as dominant" 20.

As well as the whole country, the theatrical tradition has to a high degree been dependent on England.

There is evidence for the existence of theatrical entertainment in Scotland from 1214 on, but the reason for the decline of the activity in the 17th century is to be found in the loss of patronage with the removal of James VI, who had supported the activities and also of removal of the Court to London in 1603.

It is also stressed, that the "continuing political and religious strife meant that there were no longer the settled social circumstances which make regular, professional theatre possible. Without the continued patronage of an affluent and confident middle and upper class, companies of professional actors [...] could not exist." 21

The ban of theatrical diversions in all parts of the British Isles in 1640, as well as the 'Licensing Act' in 1741 also shows the strong influence of English politics on the Scottish theatre.

In the 19th century, Scottish cities and towns became even more dependent on England and the "English cultural dominance in the British Empire's heyday" caused the Scottish arts withdrawal into Celtic myth and other kinds of traditionally 'Scottish' culture. London had become "the centre of a major theatrical industry, with an export capacity" 22, so that touring London' ensembles did serve the Scottish audience in the cities and theatrical diversion, apart from some local amateur and folk theatre groups, was dominated by England and the 'London-taste'.

Although many theatres were built and companies formed in the continuance and there had also been claims for the installation of a National Theatre, it has to be stressed that

"a lasting measure of independence of London was not to be won" until the creation of CEMA in 1940 and the Scottish Arts Council "as a virtually independent committee" 23 from the Arts Council of Great Britain.

5. The Struggle for Independence

"Theatrical and dramatic elements are present in every society, no matter how complex or unsophisticated it is" 24.

From its beginnings in ancient Greece, the theatre has always been a social institution. It might have been "an expression of civilisation" 25, but in the

case of Scotland it has, although confronted with social, economic and political difficulties, been a medium to express national identity.

5. 1 The Concept of a National Theatre

After studying this long history of Scottish theatre it seems surprising, that the aim to install a national theatre for Scotland to commission, produce and tour performances of highest quality and also to represent Scottish theatre internationally took until the 21st century to be realised.

In Germany, the claim for a national theatre had for example been made by Schiller, who had already assumed, that “ the formal conventions of Greek tragedy served merely as devices to ‘ distance’ the spectators from the play’s events so they might perceive the ideal patterns behind everyday reality.”

26. Goethe and Schiller both already argued “ that drama should transform ordinary experience rather than create an illusion of real life” 27, an ‘ illusion’, far away from Scottish reality, which was often to be seen in the plays offered to the Scottish audience by the London’ companies.

It has been stressed that “ pantomimes and variety programmes formed the national theatre of Scotland in the absence of a native drama tradition” 28, which is a paradox in itself, that is once more to be explained by the English cultural domination.

Spoken drama was only to be produced by the Theatres Royal, with governmental permission, so that all other theatrical entertainment had to concentrate on musical theatre, dances, tartan etc., which led to a series of “ plays with a ‘ national’ element, or something recognisably Scottish in them”

29. At the same time, the 'London- taste' " was for wild romantic plays set in wild romantic landscapes- and Scotland fitted the bill.", so that the English theatre adopted the Scottish cultural heritage, modified it and passed their versions on to the Scottish audience when their touring companies presented their productions. This domination also required that " Scotsmen who wanted to act or [...] to write had to head for London rather than Edinburgh or Glasgow." 30

As a result of this domination, all attempts to install an own National Theatre for Scotland failed or did come out in various forms of ' Community or Working class theatre ', so that most of those plays were coloured by political (often left- wing), working class concern.

The end of the Theatres Act in 1968, which meant the end of censorship on the stage, did offer new possibilities, that especially political theatre groups made use of.

Maria DiCenzo, who studied the results of the work of these groups, stresses, that " the strength of popular political theatre is in the bonds which are forged between performers and audiences through indirect address, comedy, music and song" 31- features that have developed from the early attempts of Scottish theatre and have now become a characteristic of contemporary Scottish theatre.

5. 2 Political and Theatrical Independence

During the 1990s, the confidence of the Scottish nation and therefore of Scottish society and culture increased in relation to the growing confidence

on the economic sector. This development of the identification as an independent Scottish nation finally reached its high point with the re-opening of the Scottish Parliament. For the first time since 1707, a parliament met in Edinburgh in July 1999.

This decisive step opened new ways for Scotland to become also culturally autonomous and is expressed by a statement of Donald Dewar, at the beginning of his work:

“ To succeed in the 21st century, Scotland needs to foster the creativity and ingenuity of all its people” 32 -which shows the awareness that arts and creativity are important for the development of a nation.

The Scottish Arts Council states, that “ Cultures are judged on the basis of their arts. Society values their ability not only to create arts, but also to interpret and understand and enjoy.” 33 and therefore supported continuous movements that made claims for “ a National Theatre for Scotland, to commission, produce and tour performances of the highest quality and to represent Scottish theatre internationally” 34.

In September 2003, this vision has finally been realised. The National Theatre will be based in Glasgow, but not be restricted to it with a building or a fixed company. Instead it will run touring productions, to “ take Scottish theatre to cities, rural locations and, eventually, international venues.” 35.

The aspect of having created a special, and much more important, independent Scottish model is expressed by stressing that “ The National Theatre of Scotland will be run on a very different model from that found on London’s South Bank.” 36. It shows a proud identification with a country that

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finally seems to have achieved full autonomy- politically as well as, at least on the theatrical sector, culturally.

6. Conclusion

Putting the development of the Scottish theatre in line with the development of the nation therefore shows, that the theatre has always been a medium to express the wish to be independent, as well as, in its own small restricted areas, live it out.

Latest developments do therefore show, that the connection between culture and politics does actually exist and has been recognised.

The history of the Scottish theatre has shown, that the influence of the theatre and its importance has not always been too strong. Nevertheless, its existence cannot be denied and the politics of the present government shows, that “ the idea that theatre should be communicative work, socially and politically active” 37 has finally been accepted and realised.

At times of oppression and resignation, the arts and the theatre have been there to provide distraction and diversion, and also to strengthen optimism and confidence so that it seems as if the idealism of the nation that is also mirrored in its theatrical history has finally led to an autonom Scotland, or have at least played a major part.