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Tradition and Revolution in Scottish Drama and Theatre: An Open Debate?

Abstract

The review aims to call attention to Mark Brown's recent study on Scottish theatre since 1969, the year that he identifies with the beginning in Scotland of a "revolution on stage" triggered by the reception and absorption of various aspects of European Modernist aesthetics on the part of some playwrights, theatre directors and companies. The book, well-founded and reader-engaging, is a must for anyone (expert or non) interested in Scottish theatre studies. However, the picture of Scottish history that ensues from it is incomplete, since, contrary to what archival scholarly research has proved, the author suggests that the 1560 Calvinist Reformation stamped out theatre and drama in Scotland for centuries, and it was only in the 1930s that it began coming out of that slump.

KEYWORDS: Mark Brown; Modernism; European theatre; twentieth-century and contemporary Scottish theatre

Mark Brown, *Modernism and Scottish Theatre Since 1969. A Revolution on Stage*, Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature Switzerland AG (Imprint of Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 266.

Mark Brown has been a professional theatre critic since 1994. He is the author of innumerable reviews published in various Scottish national newspapers, as well as of a number of critical essays appeared in collected editions and international theatre journals. He is also the editor of the book *Howard Barker Interviews 1980-2010: Conversations in Catastrophe* (Intellect Books, 2011). *Modernism and Scottish Theatre Since 1969. A Revolution on Stage* is his first extended study on Scottish theatre, the result of a research which he carried on at the University of Dundee for his PhD on contemporary drama.

1. Rationale and Argument

As suggested by the title, the book deals with the "revolution" or artistic renaissance that Brown sees developing in Scottish theatre from the 1960s onwards – a period which he regards as the most fertile in terms of innovations and creativity in the whole history of Scottish theatre. From the very beginning, he is rather peremptory in claiming that, unlike England or other European countries, Scot-

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land cannot boast any continuous Scottish theatrical tradition, mainly because of the long-term effects of the constraints imposed by state and church in the sixteenth century. Mark Brown wants to claim that, if in England theatre suffered prohibition only for the eleven years of Cromwellian Puritanism, in Scotland, Calvinism stamped it out from 1560 until the mid-eighteenth century, and, even later, it took a very long time for it to recover from this blow. He recognises the historiographical work carried out by Donald Campbell (1996), Bill Findlay (1998) and Ian Brown (2013), but, unlike these theatre historians, he argues that the Calvinist Reformation and the “suspicions and strictures of the state and Kirk” in the following centuries “seriously arrested the development of live drama in Scotland” (31) and had a “deadening impact on Scottish drama” (32), so much so that it was “still in search of a voice and an identity by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (ibid.). Taking issue with Ian Brown’s idea of a long, diversified, yet continuous and often forgotten, theatrical tradition in Scotland, Brown contends that, as late as the 1940s, when the Edinburgh International Festival first opened, “a truly thriving Scottish theatre scene was some decades off” (34).

If “Scottish theatre has had anything approximating a renaissance”, writes Brown, “it has occurred over the last five decades” (29). In his view, it is only in the late 1960s that one can identify a significant twist in what he sees as a centuries-long stagnating situation, thanks to the reception and absorption of aspects of European Modernist aesthetics on the part of some Scottish playwrights, theatre directors and companies. One might wonder why Brown neglects that European Modernism also influenced Scottish theatre while it was actually happening, in particular as regards its avant-garde and political manifestations – as proven by the impact that German director Erwin Piscator had on Glasgow Unity Theatre (cfr. Mackenney 2001). However, leaving aside what one would normally regard as milestones of European Modernism, such as the theatre of Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, he focuses instead on other four specific, yet rather eclectic, “agents” (7), as he calls them: the concept of theatrical *auteurism*, the legacy of Brecht’s theatre, the theories of Jacques Lecoq, and the influence of the English playwright Howard Barker.

Through a detailed analysis, Brown shows that such a “European Modernist renaissance” was initiated by Giles Havergal in 1969, when he became the director of the Citizens Theatre in Glasgow and, for thirty-four years, managed to challenge the supremacy of London. In fact, he was not alone in his theatrical revolution: from the start, he collaborated with the theatre designer Philip Prowse, who then became his co-director, and two years later, in 1971, they were joined by Robert David MacDonald as second co-director – together they became known as “the triumvirate”. Then Brown draws a red thread between the trio’s innovative management and the activity in the 1980s of the touring company *Communicado* headed by Gerry Mulgrew, whose “popular experimentalism” (91) marked another step in the development of a European Modernist strand in Scottish theatre. Unlike the Citizens, the Company combined an engagement with European theatre with an interest for Scottish literature and new writing, a choice which was shared by later companies, such as, among others, *Suspect Culture* and *Untitled Projects*. Finally, Brown suggests that three further moments can be associated

with a Modernist “revolution on stage”. The first moment coincides with what he defines as the “golden generation” (43) of Scottish playwrights in the 1990s, mostly represented, in his view, by the four authors he interviewed for the book: David Greig, Zinnie Harris, David Harrower and Anthony Neilson – “the finest Scottish playwrights, not only of their generation, but of any generation” (113). The second moment is marked by the work of the director and designer Stewart Laing, founder of the Untitled Projects Company in 1998. Finally, the third moment is when the National Theatre of Scotland, a “theatre without walls” (205), was launched in 2006.

Ultimately, in his conclusion, Brown strongly reaffirms his argument by suggesting that, since the contemporary theatrical scene in Scotland seems to have “gone into something of a lull since the notable successes of original plays such as Neilson’s *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* (2004) and Gregory Burke’s *Black Watch* (2006)” (235), it should “learn from the tremendous steps forward it has taken in aesthetics and playwriting over the last half-century” (236), that is, from those who contributed to the European Modernist renaissance in Scottish theatre.

2. General Structure and Contents

Throughout his book, Brown holds fast to his theory, supporting it unwaveringly along a well-traced path. At times, though, being so utterly focused on his objective, he incurs the risk of losing the wider perspective and missing important points, as will be explained in section three of this review.

On the whole, the seven chapters of the book can be divided into three parts followed by a conclusion. The first part (chapters 1 to 4) is the result of Brown’s meticulous research on twentieth-century Scottish theatre started during his PhD years, particularly on the ways in which it has received and appropriated some constituent elements of Modernist drama from the late Sixties onwards. The second part (Chapter 5) consists of five interviews to contemporary playwrights (David Greig, Zinnie Harris, David Harrower and Anthony Neilson) and the leading director/ designer Stewart Laing. Finally, the third part of the book (Chapter 6) focuses on the National Theatre of Scotland (NTS).

Chapter 1 is a Preface aimed at tracing the main four points of contact between European Modernism and Scottish theatre since the late Sixties. The first point is “auteurism”, which Brown derives from the concept of directorial *auteur* in cinema criticism, in particular Truffaut’s and Godard’s *Nouvelle Vague* in the Fifties and Sixties. An *auteur* director imposes his personality on a text, and, contravening the conventions of naturalism as to time/place setting, costumes and set designs, adapts it to his own ideas. An example is the “early-Modernist” (9) Alfred Jarry, who wrote and directed his own plays, whom Brown compares to Howard Barker in England and to the aforesaid triumvirate in Scotland (Havergal, Prowse and MacDonald). After auteurism, Brown focuses on three further agents triggering the Scottish theatrical renaissance: first, Brecht’s aesthetics rather than politics, namely his alienation techniques, narrative realism and metatheatricity; secondly, Jacques Lecoq’s theatre “of movement and gesture”; and finally, the the-

atre of Howard Barker, despite his outspoken reluctance to be formally identified with any specific literary movement or tradition, including Modernism. However, Brown regards him as unconsciously “steeped in the work of some of the greatest European Modernist artists” (20). By stating in the final section of Chapter 1 that “postmodernism’s influence in the theatre has been exaggerated” (24), Brown intends to boost his argument and convince the reader that there is nothing anachronistic about referring to late-twentieth and twenty-first-century artists as “Modernists”.

Chapter 2 provides the proper Introduction. Here Brown begins by re-stating his argument, repeating once again the aims of his book, and summarising the prime movers and forces which, from the late 1960s onwards, determined that radical transformation in Scottish theatre already amply presented in Chapter 1. However, this is also the section of the book in which the author includes “An Historical Note” in order to add details in support of his argument, which, he claims, “has the virtues of being rooted in serious, conceptual thinking and rigorous, largely original research” (29). From what he regards as the generally provincial and infirm scenario of post-Reformation Scottish theatre and playwriting, Brown only rescues the Glasgow Repertory Company, the Scottish National Players, and a few playwrights in the first half of the twentieth century, while taking a distance from those theatre historians or critics who, on the contrary, argued for a continuity of a lively theatrical tradition in Scotland both at the time and after John Knox’s arrival. Moreover, even the success of such companies as 7:84 Scotland and Wildcat in the Seventies does not shake his firm belief that “the aesthetics of live drama in Scotland in the new millennium” has not so much been influenced by these politicised groups as by the “European Modernist revolution started by Giles Havergal and the Citizens Theatre in 1969” (40).

“The Havergal Revolution” is the main focus of Chapter 3. Brown writes that, thanks to Havergal’s directorship, from 1969 to 2003, Glasgow’s Citizens Theatre “provided the initial impetus” of the renaissance that Scottish theatre has undergone since the late Sixties. Unfortunately, his successors Jeremy Raison (from 2003 to 2010) and Dominic Hill (from 2011 to the present) did not always live up to the standards of his innovative policies, cutting-edge productions – mainly based on a continental European repertoire –, international standing and “modernisation” (58). In his typical, rather enthralling, journalistic style, Brown reviews and comments on some of these ingenious productions (e.g. an *outré* version of *Hamlet*, *De Sade Show*, and a highly acclaimed adaptation of *À la recherche du temps perdu*). There are various sections of the book in which, as in this one, the reader has the impression of leafing through engaging theatre reviews – which of course does not have to be necessarily regarded as a fault.

If, on the one hand, the post-Havergal production at the Citizens lost part of its revolutionary impetus, on the other, Brown sees a line of continuity between Havergal’s policies and the experimental work of Communicado theatre company in the 1980s. This is the object of Chapter 4. One of the company founders, Gerry Mulgrew, was inspired by Havergal’s European Modernist aesthetics and anti-naturalist theatre, which he combined with his interest in Scottish literature and the Scottish vernacular. As a paradigmatic example of this “embedding [of] Europe-

an Modernist aesthetics in Scottish theatrical culture" (112), Brown indicates the Company's rather *sui-generis* stage version, in 2009 and 2012, of Robert Burns's *Tam o' Shanter*.

In Brown's view, Havergal's legacy is also evident in the 1990s in the work of four major contemporary playwrights (David Greig, Zinnie Harris, David Harrower and Anthony Neilson), and the *auteur* director/designer Stewart Laing. As has been mentioned, Chapter 5 consists of five interviews with these theatremakers, each of which is preceded by a biographical introduction to the interviewee, while, after all of them, Brown adds his concluding comments, once again to build on his central argument. Without ever losing his grip, he maintains that the five figures, more or less consciously, "belong to the same European Modernist strand in Scottish theatre", and each of them "has made a unique and crucial contribution to Scotland's theatrical renaissance" (203).

Brown furthers his case in Chapter 6. Here he shows how the National Theatre of Scotland, since its inception in 2006, has contributed to the dissemination of European modernism in Scottish Theatre and continues to do so under the directorship of Jackie Wylie, "a creative producer with a very strong grounding in Modernist and experimental theatre and performance" (224). Chapter 7 builds on this reference to Wylie's internationalist perspective, resumes some of the considerations already made in Chapter 1, and finally closes the circle by encouraging a reflection on the future of Scotland's theatrical renaissance, on how, that is, contemporary playwrights have or have not received the legacy of Havergal's revolution, of Communicado theatre company and of the Nineties "golden generation".

3. Strengths and Weaknesses

There is no denying that Mark Brown's book is a well-grounded, informative and, in many ways, impressive work. He paves the way for new challenging discussions about Scottish theatre from the late Sixties up to now, pushing the expert reader to review or resume his/her assumptions, as well as encouraging the amateur interested in Scottish theatre to discover more about the protagonists of the "Modernist revolution". Thus, for anyone doing research on twentieth-century Scottish theatre, this book must be included among their references, in addition to important critical contributions by, *inter alia*, Ian Brown, Bill Findlay, Ksenija Horvat, Tom Maguire, Adrienne Scullion, Donald Smith, Trish Reid, Randall Stevenson, and Gavin Wallace (cf. list of works cited).

In this delicate historical moment, moreover, Brown's highlighting the Europeanness of the Citizens Theatre at the time of the aforesaid "triumvirate", or Communicado's intention to promote a European theatre "in a distinctive, Scottish vernacular" (97) has important resonances. In particular, a statement stands out in the interview with David Greig, when the playwright, inspired by the Europeanness that emerged around 1969, refers to his collaboration with European companies in the Nineties. That "Europeanness", he says, "allows [Scottish artists] a context, so they can be a centred Scotland, Edinburgh, Glasgow in a Europe that contains countries like Holland, Denmark and Norway" (118). Thus, one

of the book's main merits is that it foregrounds the international reputation and transnational scope of Scottish theatre from the late Sixties to today, which means dialogue with other theatrical strands and diversity, without necessarily repudiating distinctive, national or local traditions.

Such important claims are made by the author by means of a generally conversational style which certainly has the advantage of being captivating for both an expert and a general readership. Indeed, what to the former kind of readers could appear plethoric – like the footnotes providing basic information about canonical playwrights and well-known literary strands – may, on the contrary, be welcomed by the latter. Brown never takes off the mask of the theatre reviewer. Clearly enough, his sparkling presentation of stage performances and shows derives from his regular playhouse attendance of the theatrical world, in Scotland and abroad.

While surveying twentieth-century Scottish theatre, he exhibits all his field-work experience with theatre managers, productions and companies, thus clearly giving priority to the performative, contextual and cultural elements pertaining to a theatrical event, rather than tarrying over theoretical issues around it or entering play-texts to propose close readings. His methodological choice may of course disappoint the literary scholar in search of more challenging hermeneutic efforts, but the entertaining effect is guaranteed, and so is the wealth of interesting information that one can acquire.

These strengths, however, are counterbalanced by a few weaknesses which cannot be overlooked. One of them emerges when Brown tries to (rein)force his argument by showing evidence of the lack of a clearly identifiable and strong theatrical tradition in Scotland before the 1960s. Although he draws an enticing map of Scottish theatre's indebtedness to European Modernism from that decade onwards, when he makes *en-passant* remarks calling attention to earlier theatre history, he overlooks, or can be even dismissive of, sterling studies by authoritative scholars in the field. For example, during the interview, David Greig reminds him that playwright and critic Ian Brown has written about a "long Scottish theatrical tradition that we have forgotten", and Mark Brown replies that he "would challenge him to find the playwrights, Sir David Lyndsay aside, who compare with the likes of Liz Lochhead, David Harrower and Zinnie Harries" (119). Earlier on in the book he is in fact much harsher towards Lyndsay, too: "Whether one considers Lyndsay's *Ane Satyre* to be an historical curiosity . . . or a genuinely outstanding work of Renaissance drama, few critics would claim that the sixteenth-century Scottish knight deserves a place in the pantheon of northern European playwrights" (33). In fact, in June 2013 a full-length production of Lyndsay's seminal play took place in the historic setting of Linlithgow Palace, Edinburgh, and none other than Gerry Mulgrew of Communicado Theatre Company played in it.

Sometimes Brown confuses theatrical traditions with individual authors' achievements: not all periods provide household names that made the history of Scottish theatre, but neither playwriting nor stage performance were at any moment totally stamped out in Scotland. Even a quick browsing through Glasgow University's Scottish Theatre Archive or the National Library of Scotland catalogues would provide evidence of this fact. Undeniably, the 1990s saw a lucky

concentration of brilliant playwrights making their appearance on the Scottish stage (and Brown's examples are not the only ones), but to assess earlier dramatists in relation to these contemporary voices instead of understanding them in the light of their historical and cultural backdrops runs the typical risks of all presentist approaches: anachronism and decontextualization.

Mark Brown disagrees with those critics who recognize the existence of a theatrical tradition (or traditions) in Scotland before the 1930s, whereas, in his view, it is only then that a Scottish "theatre culture . . . [began] to stand on its own feet as a national theatre scene" (35). As ground-breaking scholarly research has proved, during all those centuries between the 1560 Reformation and the twentieth-century, "whether we think of folk drama, Kirk drama, street drama, rural drama or the theatrical drama of the urban middle and upper classes, whether in Gaelic, Scots, English and even Latin, a wide range of theatrical forms was available" (Brown 2011: 2). As a matter of fact, pioneering academic work by Terence Tobin, Ian Brown, Bill Findlay, Adrienne Scullion, and Barbara Bell, to mention just a few, has shown how Scotland has had a lively tradition of drama (if not always of playhouse theatre) since the sixteenth century.

In illuminating essays, Sarah Carpenter and Ian Brown have shown that dramatic performance and various forms of theatricality flourished before as well as after the 1560 Reformation, in most cases upheld by the institutions of the day, such as the Church, the burgh and the court (Brown, Carpenter 2011). Both public and private performance, therefore, continued to be vibrant and dynamic throughout the 1560-1800 period and even included some highlights which are too often forgotten nowadays. For instance, Mark Brown ignores George Buchanan's influential plays, which were "models adopted by Corneille and Racine" (Brown 2011: 2), or the contribution made to Restoration comedy by Scottish writers such as Catherine Trotter, whom feminist critics rescued from oblivion – *in primis* Anne Kelley (2002).

In the eighteenth century, indeed, Scottish drama and theatre was far from being an irrelevant genre. One just needs to mention the ballad-opera version of Allan Ramsay's *The Gentle Shepherd* (1729) and John Home's blank-verse tragedy *Douglas* (1756), both extremely successful also as stage performances, to give evidence of the contrary. In fact, Brown refers to *Douglas* as a "celebrated and controversial event" offering "Scottish theatre audiences a flicker of patriotic cultural self-assertion", but then writes that it "did not remain celebrated for very long" (33-5). This assessment is confuted by the fact that, after its première in 1756, it continued to be produced not only in Scotland but throughout Britain for at least another century, and it faded from view in the mid-nineteenth century owing to a change in theatrical tastes and styles, such as the growing success of Thomas William Robertson's cup-and-saucer drama.

From Brown's point of view, moreover, there seems to be a sort of theatrical vacuum between Home and the 1960s. He claims that "theatre in Scotland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and into the early twentieth, was far more likely to be influenced by touring work from London than any supposed hidden gems written in Scotland after the Reformation" (35). As has been mentioned, archival research has proved the contrary, bringing to surface once marginalised or

totally neglected figures, and recognizing the innovative and experimental quality of their works. Brown overlooks them, as he seems to forget that the idea of a fixed literary “canon” and the Leavis-like concept of an organic “great tradition” have been long superseded by a more dynamic and multifarious idea of culture and literary production. Recent studies on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Scottish theatre have, for example, brought attention to the unjust neglect suffered by Scottish women dramatists, such as Jean Marishall, Eglantine Wallace, Christian Carstairs, Mary Diana Dods and Frances Wright, who importantly contributed to the Romantic-period theatrical development (Angeletti 2010).

It is, moreover, disappointing not to find in Brown any mention of a key early nineteenth-century playwright like Joanna Baillie, author of the ground-breaking *Plays on the Passions*, or, of an early twentieth-century dramatist like James Barrie, a man of the theatre by vocation, whose social plays were highly admired by Bernard Shaw, although he is now mostly remembered as the author of the novel *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*. In fact, both wrote plays which were by no means naturalist, and Barrie is regarded as a modernist by some scholars, so one might suspect that Mark Brown deliberately omitted them in order not to undermine the persuasive force of his argument. And what about the popularity of the theatrical adaptations of Scott’s novels, which, in the nineteenth-century, as Barbara Bell (2011) has argued, contributed to the development of the peculiarly Scottish phenomenon of the “National Drama”?

By the same token, Mark Brown undervalues the importance of twentieth-century popular theatre influenced by the music-hall and Scottish songs traditions, and too quickly skips through the non-naturalist, experimental work of the pre-war playwright James Bridie. He also misses major playwrights in the 1960s who predated Havergal, such as Stanley Eveling and C.P. Taylor, the former in every sense a Modernist, the latter not entirely so, yet not a naturalist either, as proved by his revisionist historical plays, questioning traditional myths and crossing conventional genre boundaries.

Moreover, Brown slightly mentions or even forgets playwrights who started to emerge in the late 1970s, flourished in the 1990s and, in some cases, are still centre stage nowadays like his four interviewees, and like them often challenge the conventions and strategies of naturalist theatre. Suffice it to remember here the pioneering role that Joan Ure played in setting the ground for a group of Scottish women playwrights that would deserve a place beside Zinnie Harris (one of the “big four” selected by Brown), whereas Brown either quickly mentions them (Rona Munro and Sue Glover) or totally bypasses them (Ann Marie di Mambro, Marcella Evaristi, Sharman Macdonald, and Catherine Lucy Czerkawska, among others), even if, in some cases, there are aspects in the playwriting of these authors that can be aligned with the Modernist Revolution he delineates throughout his book – Ure’s lyrical, symbolic drama or Evaristi’s introspective focus, for instance. All these examples testify to the fact that, despite moments of interruption or crisis, over the centuries Scotland did actually have a thriving Scottish theatrical and dramatic tradition. Thus, to identify its theatrical golden age only with the last fifty years is, to say the least, reductive.

In other words, if, on the one hand, Brown’s central thesis appears well-

grounded and in many respect convincing, on the other hand, it is sometimes imposed too rigidly. For example, none of the interviewees seems to directly associate himself or herself with a specific Modernist strand; at times, they even seem to dissent from him reading their works or activities as hostile to the tradition of naturalism and irrefutably demonstrating his thesis – both Harris and Harrower explicitly (at moments resentfully) take issue with the idea that their works epitomize the European Modernist revolution in Scottish theatre.

Brown must find his way out of what might end up in an annoying impasse, so about Harris he asserts that, despite her doubts, she “is nevertheless willing to accept that, if European Modernist theatre is constituted as this work suggests it is, she is certainly a Modernist writer” (192). Likewise, having to respond to Harrower’s scepticism about being pigeonholed as a European Modernist artist, Brown has no hesitation to say that Harrower’s hostility to postmodernism, added to “the Pinteresque dimension in his work, his Barkerian ‘anti-historicism’ and his attraction to Büchner’s ‘brokenness’” makes it “difficult to resist the idea that Harrower is, in a number of very profound and fundamental ways, a Modernist dramatist” (196-7). The “Notes on the Interviews” confirm Brown’s unwavering defence of his argument, since they tend to reiterate and reinforce the main issues and points raised by his questions to the interviewees, rather than adding new comments or suggesting new insights into their conscious or unconscious allegiance to European Modernism.

Despite these reservations, mainly aroused by the incomplete picture of Scottish theatre which Brown draws by overlooking or erasing centuries of a rich and diverse dramatic culture, Brown’s book is a good read, entertainingly accompanying the reader through an exciting scenario of plays, dramatists, theatre companies and events, and drawing attention to the international aura of twentieth-century Scottish theatre. Ultimately, whether the author likes it or not, his new book, combined with different accounts of Scotland’s theatre and drama history, cannot but enhance the value of a tradition begun many centuries earlier than 1969.

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