

scottishleftreview

Issue 11 July/August 2002

Festival?

Arts, culture and the media in Scotland



Ali Smith on the present of Scottish culture

Tommy Sheppard on the commercialisation of the fringe

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scottishleftreview

Issue 11 July/August 2002

A journal of the left in Scotland brought about since the formation of the Scottish Parliament in July 1999

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Articles for publication should be emailed to: editorial@scottishleftreview.org

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Website: www.scottishleftreview.org Tel/Fax 0141 424 0042

comment

Can there be another country which is so self-conscious about its culture? France rigorously protects its culture, and America believes firmly that its culture was handed down straight from God and represents the highest achievement of mankind. But in Scotland we have to discuss each thing we create before we can decide whether it is 'genuinely' Scottish, 'falsely' Scottish or whether it is a betrayal of Scottishness. Even the use of the word culture in Scotland generates a mixture of suspicion, confusion and disdain. Glasgow's reign as European City of Culture in 1990 must surely be considered a success, and yet people tense up at its mention, only too aware of all the holes that can be picked in it.

It seems that we take the cultural representation of Scotland enormously seriously. Billy Connolly (in whom we can see more clearly than anywhere else this process of self-mutilation) memorably said that Scotland is the only country which believes that its tourist souvenirs are its real culture. Oh yes? What about the Royalty pap which England consumes voraciously and has binged on in recent months? What about the Land of the Free and its appropriation of plasticized Stars and Stripes as an emblem of the essence of its being? Many Greeks do have mock-classical mosaic prints in their houses. It's just that the intellectual parts of these countries view this as a problem of education and enlightenment, not as a fatal flaw in the character of their nation.

There is one thing more than any other which brings out the Connolly in normally sensible Scots, and that is English sport. We have just been through that four-yearly festival of national doubt in which other countries play each other at football while Scotland plays itself at the one sport in which we have global domination - 'Who The Hell Are We?' No pastime is more inclusive - from the lofty heights of the battalions of sociologist who surface on these occasions through the self-flagellating politicians and self-promoting tabloid columnists to the punter in the pub, everyone asked one question; should we support England? And, if we do/don't, what does it mean? What is its significance?

But why can't it mean nothing and signify nothing? Like a recurrent cold we can't shake off we are told that Scotland will only be a mature nation among the world's nations when we cast off our outdated anti-Englishness and cheer for Beckham. So, by the same token, the English tabloids are full of people telling them that they won't be a mature nation until they shake off their prejudice and support Argentina? Germany is full of politicians who are assuring

their compatriots that only a cheer for England will set them free? And the biggest issue facing Turkey and Greece is their mutual dislike for each other's football teams?

Scotland does have a problem. We have an insecurity, carefully cultivated in some quarters, which makes us take the playful and recast it as the purposeful. Sport is, by its nature, a pantomime. This is my team, this is your team, I'm going to kick this ball in your net and you're not going to kick it in mine. Your players are Italian and French, mine are German and Dutch, but you wear red jerseys and we wear yellow, so we don't like you. In football you are **supposed** to have a team you like and one you don't. Decrying this makes as much sense as shushing people for booing at the pantomime villain on the basis that you'll just increase his insecurity and exacerbate his personality disorder.

Supporting Brazil, we were told, will cost us £1.8 billion in cross border trade - to the penny, but with no actual evidence whatsoever. There is a plague of violence against England because one tourist was mugged. One idiot who threatens to send anthrax he doesn't have to an English celebrity reveals the inevitable 'dark side' of being Scottish. Scotland hates people with spectacles because a kid with specs was bullied in Dundee last week (oops, that was supposed to be about the English kid). Tourist crap is made of tartan so tartan must be bad (until someone who isn't Scottish uses it which immediately restores its legitimacy). It

is not that we shouldn't be on guard for creeping xenophobia in Scotland, but dropping our guard seems fairly unlikely right now. This beating ourselves up has to stop.

The real harm isn't done to our politics - not because it isn't insidious or damaging, but because politics has become immune. Politics has got itself into a rut of pointless, nit-picking reductivism, but this has made it perversely resilient. The to-ing and fro-ing between unionists and nationalists, with each sentence being searched for traces of 'racist' or 'traitor' has become so meaningless that real politics survive nonetheless. But creations of the imagination are not always so sturdy under this kind of assault. If we place this kind of responsibility on every word, every brushstroke and every note, some of these creations will be crushed. Asking what art means and what it tells us is important, but this should not be confused with answering what it is **for**. Looking for an answer to our bizarre identity complex in every drop of ink is not what we should be doing.

So what should we be doing? We shouldn't worry so much about it all. Inevitably much of what any country produces is going to be rubbish - for every Tolstoy Russia would have had fifty third-rate hacks. Let's just enjoy the good stuff. We have to stop worrying if it is Scottish or not. Not every Scottish artist has to live in Scotland, speak with a Scottish accent and paint/write/compose 'Scottishness'. Why don't we just do what everyone else does and claim the best stuff for ourselves and leave it at that. And we can ease off on the subtext reading. There is no harm in being self reflective - in fact quite the opposite as the high-pitched squeal coming from America right now demonstrates. But it is a **subtext** and shouldn't represent the whole of the story.

And once we're not worried anymore, we should get on with it. Time to paint, write, compose, think, dance, shout, play, support and even wear tartan if we want - and all without fear.

In this issue, written without fear, you will find a range of essays about aspects of Scottish culture, the arts and the media. This is such a rich and diverse subject that it would be difficult to do the issue justice in a library never mind in 28 pages. We just hope you find some interesting thoughts in it. ■

Asking what art means and what it tells us is important, but this should not be confused with answering what it is for

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a scottish present

Ali Smith argues for a confidence in our present to enable
the art of our future

A “new sense of pride in Scots identity” is, according to the Scotland on Sunday (8 April 2001), allowing writers to leave the druggy “cul-de-sac” of recent writing and return to the past, “reintroducing the historical novel to Scots writing. On the crest of a new literary self-confidence, Scottish writers are breaking away from their gritty, urban stereotype to experiment with other genres. Professor Douglas Gifford, an expert in Scottish literature, said he believed the move from gritty downbeat writing into other genres was a response to the creation of the Scottish parliament.” Ah, the Scottish past. When will we see its like again? If there’s any confidence to look at the past again or anew it comes from the grinding hard work of a literary and cultural renewal that took decades to do what seemed unthinkable, to put a Scottish present on the map, a representation of the now.

Thirty years ago such a present was less recognisable, comprehensible or acceptable than the place that didn’t exist, the fake-backdrop landscapes and accents of Brigadoon which, when I was an eight year old sitting on the rug in front of the fire, electrified me by being that unthinkable thing - here! home! Scotland! and on the TV! As a reaction this was a common enough one for the filmmaker Bill Douglas to recognise lovingly in the second film of his trilogy *My Ain Folk* where a haggard boy in a run-down wretched black-and-white mining-village cinema is watching the only blazing colour moment in the whole trilogy, the moment from *Lassie Come Home* where Lassie the dog, loyal to the last (and soon, in another film, to be pawing her way down the side of Edinburgh Castle rock in a Hollywood version of *Greyfriars Bobby*), is standing nobly above a rich soaring Technicolor Scottish landscape, and Douglas cuts back to the boy below, in black and white, and tears are running down his face.

Douglas updated us and our childhoods, then went smoothly on to genre-bend himself, to look at the roots of inequality, social unrest, the pasts of old states and the beginnings of new ones in his epic about the Tolpuddle Martyrs, *Comrades*. He was one of the crucial artists at the forefront of Scottish cultural revision and redefinition of the present and its pasts and futures, a filmmaker

letting us see where it actually was that we lived in the world, and making art that had world-citizenship, looked elsewhere to understand context. Writers who characterise the roots of the Scottish literary renewal, such as Lochhead, Morgan, Leonard and Gray, have always been local-international translators in genre, outlook and practice, always translating recent pasts into recognisable present idiom; Gray, for instance, began by rewriting Scotland into a present-future alliance in *Lanark* and his most recent book, *A Book of Prefaces*, is a re-seeing of literature’s and language’s history as always present, in the act of heralding potential futures.

Touring Scotland last year was a photographic and literary exhibition, *Wish I Was Here*, which made a virtue of the many mundane translation transactions it takes just to understand what contemporary Scottishness means; its multicultural anthology includes Gaelic, Anglo-Scots, Shetland-Scots, Asian-Scots, AfroCaribbean-Scots and more, and this is one of the bluntly ambidextrous poems in it, by Hamid Shami, born in Pakistan and brought up in Glasgow:

Famously Ethnic

As a spokesman
For my people
All
I have to say
Is
Fuck
Individuality.

It’s vital that Scotland’s artists and arts bodies focus on the multi-potential of the present, the future, and the European and wider international context. Imagine if we had a Scottish centre for literary translation - a place where lots of the books in languages from all over the world that don’t already get published in Britain could be translated and their publishing backed and made cheaply available - and where Scottish books could be translated, published and distributed out likewise. It’s not a new idea - with the *European Quarterly* in the mid 1930s Edwin Muir and Janko Lavrin briefly set translations and connections

in motion all over Europe, hopeful as they were that “the realm of literature, art and thought should transcend all national and political boundaries.”

When it comes to the cultural acknowledgement of otherness, compared to England Scotland feels remarkably buoyant at the moment (though this is evidently a fragile state, bearing in mind that it is only a couple of years since Soutar’s and Winning’s primitive attacks - and a third of Scotland’s collusion - on sexual otherness). A hard-won acceptance of both individuality and difference, and hard-fought hard-kept alignment with Europe, come from an equally hard-won rejection of the intolerant and Presbyterian past. In England at the moment, from the Home Counties to the North - and as especially witnessed in Bradford - things are volatile, particularly regarding race as English identity is finally rattled apart by the break-up of the UK. All three main political parties have been playing the race card, in one way or another, as part of ‘mainstream politics’, as well as the Euro-fear card. (As I’m writing this I’m hearing, on the Radio 4 news, more of Blair’s increasingly banal solutions to a country whose public services are failing, whose rich have become brazen in their greed and whose poor are encouraged to believe that asylum seeker are their biggest problem. Blair is part Orwellian and part Blue-Peteresque. Education

problems are going to be solved by ‘faith’ schools, crime by locking up more people than the rest of Europe and refugees are going to be kept in big camps in the country.)

Political rhetoric is now the most terrifying abuse of the relation of language to meaning. “It was weird: ye could uise language tae avoid communicatin,” as James Robertson says in his novel *The Fanatic*. One of the better of the recent past-present antiszygy reanalyses, *The Fanatic* acknowledges both Scotland’s need for ghosts and the sheer urgency of breaking away from a split-self culture whose endless pressure is to return to one or other of the sexist or racist or self-righteous them-and-us stances: “Fuckin Scottish history and Scottish fuckin literature, that’s all there fuckin is, split fuckin personalities. We don’t need mair doubles, oor haill fuckin culture’s littered wi them. If it’s no guid versus evil its kirk elders versus longhairs, heid versus hert, Hieland and Lowland, Glasgow and Edinburgh, drunk men and auld wifies, Protestants and Catholics, engineers and cavaliers, hard men and panto dames, Holy Willies and holy terrors... Are we never gaun tae fuckin sort oorsels oot?” ■

*Ali Smith is a writer who’s last book *Hotel World* was nominated for the Orange Prize*

the scottishleftreview lectures

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time for a people's festival

Colin Fox documents the rise and fall of the Edinburgh People's Festival

Charges of elitism and inaccessibility levelled at the Edinburgh Festival are not new. Indeed they have plagued the event since the beginning. Similar complaints some fifty years ago led to the emergence of 'The Edinburgh People's Festival' and from there the festival Fringe itself.

Act One Scene One - Prologue

The visionary decision of the 1945 Labour government to lift the post war gloom led to the inauguration of an international celebration of the Arts in Edinburgh. Hamish Henderson, the great Scots singer songwriter and poet, described, how the Attlee government enlisted what he called 'the Edinbourgeoisie', the city's arty-elite and effete middle class, to organise the party and draw up the invitations.

Act One Scene Two - Exclusion the Impetus for Change

Needless to say the exclusive atmosphere surrounding the official festival provoked an impassioned debate on how best to involve the full citizenry. Opinion was sharply divided. There were those like poet and writer Hugh MacDiarmid, who dismissed the event as 'the latest English cosmopolitan plot to subvert the native Scottish culture', and he argued for a boycott. Others like Henderson himself, Edinburgh Trades Union Council, the Miners Union, the Labour and Communist Parties, took the view that an opportunity existed to establish a broader celebration of the arts with a wider appeal. So it was that the Edinburgh Labour People's Festival Committee was established to organise a 'People's Festival' in 1951. Its aim - 'To initiate action designed to bring the Edinburgh Festival closer to the people, to serve the cause of international understanding and goodwill' - a very rich seam in the spirit of post war Scotland. Central to its success, the organisers believed, was attracting working class families, and keeping prices within the reach of everyone. Trades Union branches and community organisations were brought together in a celebration of the arts 'By working people for working people.'

Act Two Scene One - Taking the Plunge

Late in August 1951 an ambitious People's Festival programme was unveiled at the Oddfellows Hall. There was a Glasgow Unity Theatre production of Joe Corrie's 'In Place of Strife', Ewan McColl's anti -nuclear play 'Uranium 235' performed by the Theatre Workshop, The Lesmahagow Male Voice Choir and the Tranent and Fa'side Players and many other popular attractions. The climax to the weeks celebration was a 'People's Ceilidh' with

singers, poets, performers and musicians from across the burgeoning Highlands and Islands folk scene, all introduced with gusto by people's impresario Hamish Henderson himself. The event was an enormous success, critically and by audience numbers, so much so that plans for an even more ambitious Festival were immediately laid for the following year.

The event grew in confidence and sought to reflect post war frustrations in its theme for 1952, 'That the people's voice may be heard and the people's needs may be met.' Never slow to criticise the elitism of the official festivities, Labour Councillor, Jack Kane, the Chairman of the Edinburgh People's Festival, opened the proceedings comparing the official and the people's events,

"The large amount of support which the EPF has had, made it obvious that the International Festival was not catering for the needs of all the ordinary people of Edinburgh. One of our aims is to make the Scottish people alive to their own cultural heritage and to show them how the arts grow out of social struggle, reflecting the lives of the people and becoming instruments for progress."

The EPF now had the backing of 50 organisations representing 150,000 people. Regular reports in the Daily Worker and the Edinburgh Evening News compared this to 17 the first year. The Edinburgh Evening News critic announced triumphantly 'Ewan MacColl, has written a new play 'The Travellers', on at the Oddfellows Hall presented by the Edinburgh People's Festival. The action takes place on an express train and a special set giving the impression of interior coaches has been erected in the gangway of the theatre, with the audience seated on either side.'

In honour of Hugh MacDiarmid, (by then reconciled to participation) celebrating his 60th birthday, a series of poetry recitals was arranged 'representing various aspects of the Scottish Renaissance Movement' which he had helped to create. Young Scots poets lined up to deliver tributes in Lallans, English and Gaelic. Sydney Goodsir Smith, Alexander Trocchi, Norman McCaig and Sorley McLean led the way. An impressive programme of lectures, films, dances and concerts all added to the grand scale. Willie Gallacher, the Communist MP for West Fife spoke on the 'American Threat to British Culture'. Lectures included 'Thomas Muir to Robert Owen - a culture of dissent.' Hamish Henderson presented Gaelic and Scots songs and music. The Ceilidh, in the Oddfellows Hall, was again the grand finale to events, and this time introduced

performers from the Western Isles plus special guests from the West Indies.

And all achieved on a shoestring! Unlike the official festival, patronised by royalty and with a princely budget for the time of £50,000, the EFP ran on pennies from audiences and donations from union branches. EPF organiser, Mr Martin Milligan, proudly boasted a substantial increase in audiences, of whom he pointedly estimated more than 80 per cent were from 'a working class background'. In an attempt to broaden the list of benefactors the name of the Committee was changed that year from the Edinburgh Labour Festival Committee to the People's Festival.

Act Three Scene One - Proscribed

But just as there seemed no stopping its advance, whatever its name, dark forces gathered off stage. The EPF became a victim of the House Committee on Un-American Activities. The Scottish Trades Union Congress, one of the most important players in the organisation, was now in the grip of McCarthyism. And, despite widespread protest, it proscribed the Edinburgh Labour People's Festival as a 'Communist Front'. The Labour Party followed suit.

This was a shattering blow, a kick in the teeth to the many people both inside and outside the Communist Party involved in its success. The diversity and broad appeal that had been the linchpin of its success now drained away like vital oil. The 1953 festival, though much larger than the first year and introducing many interesting new innovations, had lost momentum. When compared to the second year's successes it was small beer.

'Miners branch banners and bright streamers brought colour to the Oddfellows Hall for the opening of the 3rd EPF. The packed hall was 'decorated with drawings of Walt Whitman, Vaughan Williams and other figures' declared defiant reports in the Daily Worker. Organisers spoke bravely of attractions in the new programme and being determined not to allow the ban to prevent their success. But it was bravado. Not that there were not remarkable attractions on offer. Norman Buchan, later to become Labour MP introduced the remarkable Czech film **Janosik**, a mixture of Douglas Fairbanks swashbuckling and revolutionary cinematic techniques reminiscent of Eisenstein. There was an acclaimed Moliere comedy **Imaginary Invalid** by the ubiquitous Theatre Workshop of Joan Littlewood. There was a 'sparkling' performance of Pudovkin's Storm Over Asia, the story of the Mongols fight against British Imperialism in 1920's Russia. Described as the 'most exciting production seen so far at either festival'

by one reviewer, it was not enough to lift the dispirited morale of many stalwarts.

Act Four Scene One -Writing on the Wall

There was a determined effort to keep going but by 1954 even the die-hards could see the writing on the wall. A game attempt to weather the storm involved a singing troupe from Essex, an internationally renowned Bass singer, Martin Lawrence, a children's concert, scientific experiments and of course the Ceilidh. All were fine in themselves but incomparable to what had gone before. If 'imitation is the sincerest form of flattery', the official festival paid the People's Festival the huge complement of arranging its own Ceilidh in 1954. Hamish Henderson wrote a sympathetic yet rueful look at the 'Hail Caledonia' festival for the Daily Worker. 'For the last three years the EPF Ceilidh's have presented Gaelic and Scots folk, now the official festival has noticed it'. The EPF's own Ceilidh was still the one to beat, however, for innovation and new talent. Hamish Henderson introduced young Gaelic singers and performers including Dominic Behan, both of Brendan.

The curtain came down on the Edinburgh People's Festival, 1951-1954.

Prologue: History Repeating Itself in 1990's

But the Ceilidh was not the only mark left by the Edinburgh People's Festival on the cultural landscape. The success of the Edinburgh People's Festival, albeit short lived, alerted many eagle-eyed promoters to the clear potential of such a 'pile em high sell 'em cheap approach. Today's Festival Fringe is the daughter of the People's Festival and she owes much to those pioneers of the early 1950's. Indeed many believe today's multi million pound circus has much yet to learn about taking art, drama, literature, music and dance, out of the city centre to the people of Edinburgh.

And there are those of us involved in the Edinburgh People's Festival 2002 who intend to mark the 50 year anniversary of the Edinburgh People's Festival with our own small tribute in August. The Jack Kane Centre in Craigmillar will open the proceedings and included in our gala will be our own tribute to Hamish. We hope our modest event will galvanise others to pick up the idea and again, just like the original idea, lead to bigger and grander celebrations next year. ■

Colin Fox is the Convenor of the Edinburgh People's Festival 2002 and the city's May Day celebrations

a common treasury

Francis McKee explores the health of radicalism in the visual arts in Scotland today

Life seems so rosy in the cradle,
But I'll be a friend I'll tell you what's in store
There's nothing at the end of the rainbow.
There's nothing to grow up for anymore

Richard Thompson

There have been some memorable moments when Scottish artists have celebrated radicalism or taken on the state - Ken Currie's depiction of the Clydeside in the 1980s, for example, or Ian Hamilton Finlay's epic struggles with the Strathclyde police at Little Sparta. It's more difficult to recall any such examples in recent years. Younger artists and curators are more likely to claim that such direct political engagement is impossible. The advance of global capitalism has engendered a belief that all resistance can be ultimately absorbed by the system, then neutralised and regurgitated as style. The collapse of the soviet bloc and the depressingly conservative experience of living under Blair's New Labour has removed any visible model of revolt. Occasional anniversaries spark interest in the Paris riots of May 1968, the rise of the Black Panthers or the shock of punk - but simply as nostalgia for a kind of shared commitment.

Even the word 'radicalism' has an antiquated air about it, tapping memories of black and white news footage soundtracked by the Stones or Steppenwolf. And that might be the problem. Radicalism is wedded to those images from the sixties and our measure of revolt is still based on the never-ending replays from that decade. If we look carefully at the work of artists in Scotland today, though, it might be possible to find a different set of tactics that still manage to raise consciousness, ask awkward questions and strike (slyly) at the jugular.

Perhaps the most obvious starting point would be with the work of the sculptor Kenny Hunter who last year found himself simultaneously demonised in Aberdeen and praised in Glasgow. In the immediate wake of September 11 Hunter had three works in the public eye. A survey of contemporary art in Dundee and Aberdeen included **Bad Conscience and Old Skool Plastik** (2000) - a work exploring the motivation of older, imperial public monuments which caused public concern because of its representation of skulls and **What is History?** (2000) - a pair of bookend busts of Monica Lewinsky and Osama Bin Laden. Both works upset the city authorities and led to the vilification of the artist. Meanwhile, in Glasgow, the public focused on Hunter's new statue for the fire service,

Citizen Firefighter (2001), and wreaths were laid beside it as a spontaneous response to the loss of the New York ladder companies. The achievement here was to engage the public on all fronts and to prove that problematic public art still had a potential constituency. In an age where art is required by the government to be 'good' and to 'educate' the public this is a burning issue for young artists. The monument, with all its imperial, Victorian implications, is an obvious target for such concern.

In 1997 Ross Birrell tackled this head-on with a performance in one of the shrines of Scottish labour history - George Square:

Working-Class Hero... took place in George Square. I acquired a makeshift plinth and attached a plaque which read: "Ross Birrell, Working-Class Hero, (b. 1969)". The performance was a response to a number of things but it was in the main motivated by the desire to signal the presence of an absence: in particular the 'Battle of George Square' in 1919 when the Red Flag was hoisted upon the municipal flag-pole and the army were called in to dispel any threat of a repeat of the Soviet revolution in Russia. The lack of any commemorative plaque or statue to this event and the eradication of the working-class, in general, from any public monuments except war memorials, seemed to me to be rather curious in a City which had been dominated by the Labour Party since before I was born. However, acknowledging that we live in a post-ideological landscape with defined lack of faith in politicians, I did not believe that the solution to this cultural and civic contradiction lay in petitioning for a sculpture of John MacLean to 'redress-the-balance' of cultural colonialism. Apart from my belief that to erect a permanent sculpture would be to replicate an official culture I had come to mistrust, I felt if people really wanted to publicly commemorate this event there would be a statue to MacLean or Maxton in George Square or Glasgow Green by now, complete with bird-shit and optional graffiti. In short, we get the public art we deserve.

That there was no real desire for a monument to a 'working-class hero' was a symptom, I understood, of the declining knowledge of or interest in, the historical working-class movements in Glasgow (due mainly to an absence from the history curriculum in secondary schools) combined with a popular 'New Labour' denial of its cultural relevance.

More recently, the artists duo, John Beagles and Graham Ramsey have approached the same subject from the opposite angle, proposing a series of monuments celebrating populist movement in a 1999 exhibition in London entitled **Wat Tyler Wot Happened?**

Over the last 700 years there have been some right tasty punch-ups betwixt the forces of established power and assorted peasant/prole groupings. In a series of maps, plus a video drama documentary, we recorded the chequered history of popular protest in and around London. This mapping covered events as diverse as the 1381 Peasant's Revolt, the Tartan Army invasion of 1977 and the more recent Poll Tax Riots.

In addition, we constructed a series of maquettes for proposed public monuments to Hamish of the Tartan Army, the Suffragettes and illegal Acid House Raves...

These monuments mirror the bankrupt world of the establishment, using art to construct alternative histories or to highlight the inadequacies of the official mythmakers. In this vein there are a whole series of Scottish artist such as Nathan Coley, Martin Boyce, Graham Fagen and Toby Paterson who have plundered the iconography of modernist architecture to explore the failures and legacies of inner city architecture and urban planning. This critique is at its most cutting in Fagen's video **NoThank**, an ironic documentary in which an intellectual explains away the vacuous horrors of modern housing estates in perfect architectural jargon.

Some of the most subversive works, however, barely touch on direct political or social problems. Christine Borland's **From Life** in 1994 quietly drew on the fact that it was possible to buy imported human skeletons in Britain. **HeLa, Hot** (1999) presents human cells suspended in a nutrient broth. The cells ultimately derive from a 31 year-old African-American woman Henrietta Lacks who died from a cancerous tumour in the 1950s in Baltimore. The cells are multiplied in vitro and used throughout the world while Lack's family continue to fight for recognition and payment for her role in modern medicine. Part of a growing body of work, Borland's art persistently questions

the vulnerability of human identity in the modern world and the political implications of genetic research.

Younger artists and curators are more likely to claim that such direct political engagement is impossible. The advance of global capitalism has engendered a belief that all resistance can be ultimately absorbed by the system, then neutralised and regurgitated as style

Finally, though, the most radical gesture in contemporary Scottish art may not lie in any one work but in the unspoken collective agreement to dismiss London as the inevitable capital of art in Britain. This may be part of the larger global art movement in which the 'marginal' is now considered as vital as the traditional art centres but it has a peculiar resonance in Scotland where the new executive is still finding its feet. Art, of course, has already found that confidence, declared in works such as Ross Sinclair's **Hamnavoe Free State** (1999) and in **Journey to the Edge of the World - The New Republic of St Kilda** (1999) where he constructs an alternative parliament from cardboard boxes. It is this DIY spirit that runs through Sinclair's work that has most to teach the executive and which has driven the Scottish art scene for the past decade. Writing in a 1992 essay, 'This is something for the blunted', Sinclair outlines what remains a useful manifesto which concludes as follows:

Fuck this you must be bored stiff but before it's all finished one last try because it seems that the thing I was really trying to get round to saying probably not very well you might very well think is really very simple in fact only three words long and everyone knows it already if only we'd be honest

for once and suddenly give everything away and just get on out there and give it a shot and kick its fucking ass right out there and touch it hard with your soft hands while there's still a tiny bit of time left but now it's running out fast threelittlewordsanditgoeslikethis...

Do it now



Francis McKee is Head of Digital Arts & New Media at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Glasgow and a freelance writer

a redistribution of experience

Why has the left lost interest in culture asks Robin McAlpine?

We all love Marlboros, right? They're so cool, so untamed west, so masculine. Death is a noble thing, rarely hurts, is usually clear-cut, and is almost always worth it. America gets it wrong sometimes - who doesn't? - but they really do represent the very best in human nature, and in the end they have your best interests at heart. There are two kinds of gay men - cute, unthreatening best friends (often rather quirky) and serial killers. And a woman who is over size ten is just a remarkable makeover waiting to happen. Or someone's lovable best friend. All of which is obvious because we **believe** it. We know this isn't always the case but we don't **believe** the exceptions because we don't see them. Let's face it; bombed Afghans simply don't hurt like bombed Americans.

Sorry for pointing out the obvious, but there is a point. Just remember that all of this is made so by Hollywood.

And then there is the incontrovertible (as opposed to things we choose to believe despite knowing better). The market is God, and markets are built by entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs are the visionaries who see an opportunity and know how to exploit it. It's all about sell, about tapping into the desires of consumers whether they know they want what you have or not. Because we are all consumers now, and nobody really makes anything.

Again, an obvious point for which I apologise.

The nation state is on the way out. Corporations are the new centres of power, and make the idea of place or person seem quaint. And as Thomas Frank demonstrates in his excellent **One Market Under God**, if you don't believe that they are a better representation of the real views of the populace than the 'democratically elected' state then you're living in the wrong decade. Not that there is no room left at all for the nation state, but only if it has clout, and that means GDP. America rules the world because it has military and economic might, and that is what counts.

Taking you back three paragraphs, it is really Hollywood which has conquered the world, not Wall Street, and the global bullying of the big state-economies is what much of the profit-making results from, so this point is less obvious. But I'll leave it parked here for a minute.

And people know what they like. Shania Twain, Jean-Claude Van Damme, Bridget Jones, Mariah Carey, Friends, posters from Athena, and the Sony PlayStation. They rule the world because people like them, and that's that. Participative democracy is **so** last millennium and people just don't like it that much. And no-one wants Africa to

implode but after a hard day at work it just isn't reasonable to expect people to get worked up about it. And any of you elitist snobs who think otherwise should get off the train.

So let me recap. Culture (not political theory, not management gurus, not personal experience) paints our world for us. Those with real power over the world developed it as much in the mind as in the factory or the battlefield, even if nobody likes to admit it. So if you try to **talk** about culture it seems to disappear before your eyes, leaving only consumers, salesmen and nobody making anything. We have a world of modern wonder which we are led to believe wasn't created but which is no more than the result of fortuitous opportunities successfully exploited. And we 'know' this because nobody who counts talks about creativity. The economy is actually built on creativity but its masters would have us believe that the fruits of creativity are only fine so long as they don't have aspirations beyond being a pastime. Remember, it is not creators but markets which are your God; 'stuff' just appears. And utter crap is legitimised if it brings in the bucks. Because, while we have to teach children how to read, write, talk, walk, count, run, work, cook, eat, we are supposed to believe that people are born with a fully-functioning cultural intellect. After all, people spring from the womb with everything they need to assess the glorious complexities of music, painting, books and film, and if you believe there is any scope for improving these skills at any stage after birth then you are an unredeemable elitist snob. An enemy of the people. And somehow the outcome of this is that some people end up with a hell of a lot of money and all the fruits of civilisation while some people stay very poor, but nobody ever asks why?

On one hand we are told that culture is ours by birthright so there's no need to get worked up about it, and on the other we are told that it isn't really important anyway. Then it is used to rob us of our real birthrights while justifying the world's searing inequalities. Since the beginning we have known this goes on, and we have called it myth, theology, ideology or discourse. But we still turn our noses up at 'culture'.

Actually, none of the above is surprising in any way. But there is something I can't quite figure out, and it is why the left takes no interest in culture and its (mis)uses? Oh, you scream, but they do: Ken Loach and Peter Mullan, the Wildcat or 7:84 theatre companies, a host of novelists, a choir of protest singers. But these are artists who have political views, not politicians or activists themselves. And when they do talk about politics (with a few honourable exceptions) they talk about the same things as politicians

- wage inequality, poor public services, health disparities. The full-timers show little interest; those on left who want to change things seem to want to change everything **apart** from culture. Anyone standing a hundred paces back ought to notice that our creative world has been usurped by the right (and I roll the market-capitalist into this concept). The artists are often radical and there is plenty left wing and radical art, but it is chaperoned into a harmless ghetto where only the converted hang out anyway. Name me one piece of genuinely popular left wing art - Rab C. Nesbit is as close as I can come. In capitulating to big record companies and the games console manufacturers, in commenting upon soap opera plots as if they mattered, in our failure to defend the academics and the artists, the left has abandoned culture to the right. And in Scotland perhaps more than anywhere.

Why is this? There are probably hundreds of reasons, but there are two which are relevant here. The first is a result of some of the traditions of Scottish working classism. From time to time I have suggested to left-leaning friends that we should make a lot more effort to get people (all kinds of people) to go to the theatre, or to the opera, or to read classic books. Usually they will spin round and say "what's that middle class shite got to do with working people?" The resolve which sustained working class culture against the homogenisation of society is now a restricting reductivism. Could we please, with urgency, decouple intelligent and difficult from 'middle class', and can we give it back to people generally. When did we give up on the redistribution of experience for the redistribution of wealth alone? And when did we start accepting that the poor would just buy twice as many Daniel O'Donnell albums in utopia? In any case, working class culture was never dumb - we have just lost sight of its intelligence and sophistication while lauding its caricature.

The second reason is tied up with what has been discussed above. We have been persuaded that culture isn't really important and that only cash counts (wage inequality for the left, Dow Jones Index for the right). This is the phenomenal achievement of the '90s - we were encouraged to engage with culture (from snowboarding to the revival of popular cinema) so long as we didn't take it seriously. William Morris said he only wanted to be surrounded by things he knew to be useful or believed to be beautiful; market populism says we should only be surrounded by things we know to make a profit or believe to be 'fun'. And, unlike Morris, we're not to believe these can be the same thing. So the left just lost interest.

And the most surprising thing about all of this is that this is one of the truly seismic powers that the Scottish Parliament has. Education and cultural policy are such potent forces that it is to our collective shame that we treat

one as an anteroom to our factories and the others as an irrelevance. There are a few simple things we could do which would transform Scotland for generations to come. The changes would be cultural, but would probably result in much better health, much greater equality and less crime and more tolerance in society.

Let's start in the schools. Scotland has a wealth of cultural learning resources which would both enlighten and excite our youngsters. Every theatre, gallery, museum and historical building has them, but they are woefully under used. Go to one of them, watch how much the children enjoy them, chat to some children afterwards and marvel at how much they have learned. And then ask why the schools can't afford to hire a bus to go to them. And once you have a play or a musical or an opera or a comedy routine produced, the marginal costs of performing them are small. From primary school, children should be going to these on a regular basis, creating a critical mass, fuelling the development of even more and providing a landscape of cultural opportunities for a generation which they will then be able to chose from throughout life. If they have been going to the theatre or to comedy clubs or rock concerts or art galleries or museums or indeed just for a walk in the countryside once every couple of weeks from the age of five, it will become as natural for them as renting a video. And they will learn to think and question with every visit.

Let's teach creativity, not how to pass exams. I left school knowing differential calculus but unable to match the half-dozen painters I knew of with the century they worked in, and with little understanding of the basic tenets of civil society. Appreciation should be taught along with performance, and we should be much less worried about some of the functional skills (every single Scot learns how to do simultaneous equations by 14 years old, and yet I have never used this 'skill' once since). Glasgow's 216 primary schools share five full-time music teachers. Do the maths on that one.

And let's teach people about the world's cultures. If we talked about (for example) Islam from an early age we wouldn't be in the mess we are now. If we taught children what has happened in Indonesia, or Central America, or Africa it wouldn't happen so easily next time (just like we were taught what happened in Europe in the '30s). Let's teach them about the foods of the world and persuade them that food does not necessarily originate from a freezer. Above all, let's crush the high culture/low culture divide forever, not to imply that everything is of equal worth (which it isn't) but because we should all have a basket full of diversity - I find **South Park** very funny and found it hard to put down Dostoyevsky's **The Brothers Karamazov**, and this is **not** a contradiction.

When did we give up on the redistribution of experience for the redistribution of wealth alone?

Then let's start to take cultural policy seriously. Let's discuss a French-style 'rationing' of poor quality cultural imports to help Scottish culture flourish. Let's set up a Scottish film school and expand the creative writing courses in our universities. Let's make a national holiday and dedicate it to the arts, a day of free events, rock gigs and theatre for some opera and comedy clubs for others, and workshops too (remember, Changing Rooms is about creativity and the arts - there are plenty ways to offer people learning they are genuinely interested in). Let's set up some new national companies which are subsidised to make them accessible so our young performers and composers/writers have somewhere to work.

Let's promote Scotland around the world as a home of thinking and creativity, because it will be a hell of a lot more effective than trying to promote ourselves as

a source of 'flexible labour'. People WILL notice (a recent reading by James Kelman and Irvine Welsh in New York had people queuing round the block hours before it opened). Let's embed creativity in our economic policy.

Above all, let's start to change attitudes; let's fight back against 'dumbing down'. Two years ago the Daily Mail revealed that a Scottish academic was studying lesbianism in French literature. Let us hope that the chorus of rent-a-quotes attacking this piece of work marks the low point in Scotland's intellectual development. Nobody likes every work of art, but denying its right to exist is a road which ends with the strictly commercial; a world which looks like it is ruled by Celine Dion but which is actually ruled by Rupert Murdoch.

Now is the time to take an interest. ■

Robin McAlpine is Deputy Editor of the Scottish Left Review

lifted voices

Janey Buchan looks at the history of political song

Political Song. How do we recognise it? How do we define it? Does it need reviving? The power of song is everywhere around us and often in the most unexpected ways. At Aldermaston or the Holy Loch everyone lifted their voice and were into what my late husband Norman Buchan called the 'aspirational'. **Can't You Hear the H-Bomb's Thunder, I'm going to Lay Down My Sword and Shield.** Often too the republican side-swipe - **Scotland Hasnae Got a King an' She Hasnae Got a Queen.** That many of them had crossed the pond in another form was really not known. Last year I had several phone conversations with a man in New York, a singer, who was involved in illustrating a lecture by Eli Seigel on Charles Dickens. They had chosen **Hold the Fort for We Are Coming** as part of the programme. Its history came from the American Civil War when a report-back to a Church had inspired someone to pen a hymn which Mady and Sankey edited, re-wrote and took it everywhere in their tours. When they brought it to Britain it was hugely successful and after several other uses and changes became the anthem of the international maritime trade unions.

My generation often heard it in the peroration of people like Helen Crawford Anderson at the huge St Andrews Halls rallies of the Communist Party. Its powerful sound of support, spoken or sung, has never left any of us.

Although the series of concerts at this year's Edinburgh Festival are designated 'Scottish', we all know that it is not possible to

contain within national or any other boundaries song of any sort. Think Scottish-Irish and you'll click into that all right.

Hymns which were sung with vehemence in Colonial times are startling to hear. The musicals which the American trade unions used can still resonate. **Pins & Needles** and **The Pyjama Game** were around the tailor and garment worlds. When Roy Hattersley wrote in **The Guardian** that **Finian's Rainbow** was the most political of these musicals I thought he was nuts. But I attended a reading style performance by The Lost Musicals Society in the Fortune Theatre in London and quickly changed my mind. **When the Idle Poor Become the Idle Rich** is a stunner. Written by Yip Harburg it doesn't miss the target. Harburg wrote something like 1,000 songs - the best known of which is **Buddy Can You Spare a Dime** but the McCarthyite years hit performances of his many works like it did the world of film. There is a Yip Harburg Foundation in the US which people might want to get to know.

The peace movement; the folk revival; the West End revue all contributed within their genre memorable material. **The Ratepayer's Iolanthe** around Ken Livingstone and London Left - define that as you will - worked straight on to the Gilbert & Sullivan original. The political shifts and moves which are the base of a good deal of the G & S material are worth looking up and knowing and, frankly, being properly acknowledged. They have the huge advantage too that most people can get their voices around them from their school show days and can be the base

of parody and pastiche. Among the material at Glasgow Caledonian University's Centre for the Political Song is the script of a LRD (Labour Research Dept) jeu d'esprit at the end of a Summer School where George Bernard Shaw was present and one of the songs based on a G & S classic was written by Allen Hutt (author of the magisterial Post War History of the British Working Class) and typographical designer extraordinaire especially for the Daily Worker. Norman and I took it back stage in an Edinburgh theatre so that his son, Sam Hutt, better known as Hank Wangford could see it and he was stunned. We all agreed that it could be sung then and would be totally relevant.

Students, especially in Cambridge, were responsible for some of the long lasting songs at the time of the Spanish Civil War. At that time too London Unity theatre produced as many musicals as orthodox scripted plays. In recent times Red Review came on board with their own shows - overwhelmingly current affairs in song. The 'Left' (and how do we define that nowadays?) surely didn't like a lot of it because it took on board some of their preposterous claims. **What a Friend we Have in Tony** to the tune of **What a Friend we Have in Jesus** did more than anything to puncture the claims of Benn and his supporters.

The NUJ members who were on strike at the Pergamon Press in Oxford excelled in every single song they wrote, sang, and this lifted their campaign everywhere. **Big Fat Maxwell Once Looked Out** (Tune: **Good King Wencelas**)

Right now at the Music Department of Glasgow University the political base of the Motets of William Byrd have been

established as political songs sung as an act of defiance by Catholics in Elizabethan England. The world of Opera is full of politics - get the words written and sung by Italians to Verdi's great **Va Pensiero** (The Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves from Nabucco) and be in the audience where the Italians clearly know both and are on the point of joining in - I hope I'm there on the day they finally do.

This sweep through political song could not but salute the songs from and about Chile, Cuba and South Africa. At the time of the Scottish football team going to play in Chile, Adam MacNaughtan's **There's Blood Upon the Grass** did indeed - **Tell It Like It Is**. When the Pinochet arrest happened Bill Speirs read it at an STUC meeting and I spookily heard him use almost exactly the same phrases as I had used when I wound up a debate on Chile at the end of Scottish Conference of the Labour Party. It is that rare thing - a song which 'reads' as well as it sings. Jim Kerr's **Free Nelson Mandela, Fly Like Eagles and like Doves** by Ian Walker, Hamish Henderson's **Rivonia** based on **Long Live the 15th Brigade** from the Spanish Civil War...

I personally felt that we should have opened the Scottish parliament with the French revolutionary song **Ca Ira** and then gone into a Scots song - and there were many to choose from - as it would have reaffirmed the support of ordinary people well outside France for the French Revolution and also the Auld Alliance - but the advice of consultants was listened to, and we've all been there/done that with a vengeance. ■

Janey Buchan works with the Centre for Political Song at Glasgow Caledonian University



ASLEF calls for the Government to introduce a charter of workers' rights that would include, the right to full employment, rights from day one of employment, the repeal of oppressive anti trade union legislation and positive laws encouraging trade unions to represent their members individually and collectively.

Mick Rix, General Secretary. ASLEF, 9 Arkwright Road, Hampstead, LONDON NW3 6AB.

in pursuit of the trivial

Three years into home rule and parts of the media have followed an unremittingly negative agenda towards the Parliament. Writing anonymously, a leading Scottish journalist asks if a changing media landscape will accelerate or reverse this trend.

Charles Clarke, the Chairman of the Labour Party, is the epitome of the political bruiser. He likes nothing more than a good intellectual scrap. But even for a man with the skin of a rhinoceros, the decision recently to take on Fleet Street's obsession with finding the negative in political reporting must have been done after much soul searching. For there is an unwritten rule when it comes to war between politicians and the media - don't get involved, for the politician can never win.

Clarke's broadside, subsequently repeated by a number of Ministers (David Blunkett referred to reporting as on the edge of insanity) was not merely done in the name of a Government fightback. It was genuinely born out of a view that straight reporting and sophisticated analysis had been surrendered on the altar of turning political journalism into infotainment. The demonising of politicians, the obsession with personality and the fetish for the reporting of trivia and nonsense, certainly degrade the political system and engender voter apathy. Depressingly for Charles Clarke, there is little evidence that his attempt to start a serious debate about the obligations of journalism in a mature democracy have penetrated.

In Scotland, many MSPs will have observed Clarke's offensive with wry amusement. Although sections of the Scottish press have not descended as low as their English counterparts, they are not far behind. The intensity of the attacks on Scotland's new institutions has been depressing. It is hard not to come to the conclusion that some want to strangle devolution at birth. Some of course continue to be upfront in their hostility.

In 1999 only 58 per cent of Scots voted in the Scottish General Election. The cross-party fear on the Mound is that figure might prove to be impossible to reach next May. Parties are haemorrhaging members and voter cynicism towards elected representatives has never been greater. The Scottish media must in part accept that they have played a key role in this state of affairs. Sound editorial judgement appears to have got lost as newspapers try to outdo one another as to whose reporting can be silliest. It's little wonder the voters are switching off.

Take the Daily Record. Champion of devolution and champion of New Labour. It has no strategic overview of its reporting, no sense of what it wants to do and how it should engage Government other than be a hothouse for

the spewing of bile. Its 'campaigns' tap into the populist and substitute glib posturing for a serious examination of policy. Its handling of asylum stories has been appalling. On the serious issues around drug misuse, if you advocate decriminalisation or legalisation then you are nothing more than a pusher in the eyes of the Record. The treatment of Tommy Sheridan for his views on legalisation was nothing more than persecution.

Nor can Scotland's biggest selling Daily make up its mind what it wants. They were happy to laud Donald Dewar as the father of the nation only to spend a great deal of time attacking him, not his policies. Who could forget 'It has to be Henry'. No sooner was he in the job than he was being subjected to the same treatment. Wendy Alexander got it too over Section 28 and whatever was to be made about Tom McCabe wanting to claim a housing allowance in Edinburgh, it didn't justify a tone of reporting which painted him as a wide boy on the make.

Those looking to the broadsheets will find the same depressing agenda which sees personality not policy as the catalyst for coverage. The Scotsman continues to depress. Scotland on Sunday has the same snide tone, driven by an obsession to be negative.

There have been exceptions. For reporting with an absence of agenda and an attempt to analyse the substance of policy, the Sunday Herald has been refreshing. It offers what Scotland on Sunday did in its early days - an ambition to be serious and non-partisan without the temptation to follow a tabloid agenda.

In part the negative coverage has been a product of too many journalists sitting in their Lawnmarket offices with too few stories to cover. Parliaments tend to produce worthy initiatives if rather dull by the standards of most newsdesks. And therein lies another problem. These desks put pressure on their staff reporters to come up with something different. It is almost an order to pursue the trivial.

The Parliament's second term will be different. For one, it will have bedded down in the institutional sense. More importantly the media will re-assess their staffing levels in the light of the experience of the first four years. Most journalists expect a downsizing. This is not necessarily bad as it will lead to less pressure to pursue personality-led politics.

The first term experience has also shown up another problem - namely that there are too many titles in the Scottish market place. What is less clear is what any downsizing will mean for how the media more generally engage with the legislature. This is a revolutionary time for the industry which will undergo yet more upheaval in the coming year when the Government's Communications Bill makes its way on to the statute book.

So, will change to the wider media landscape affect serious coverage of news, politics and current affairs?

In broadcasting terms there are two big issues to be resolved in the medium term. The first relates to whether Scottish and Grampian Television will remain as Scottish companies within the umbrella of SMG - the legislation will pave the way for both being taken over. SMG has diversified interests in the media sector and its hope is that a group which contains television companies, newspapers, radio stations and outdoor advertising concerns will not prove attractive to Carlton and Granada, the big players in ITV. The two Scottish ITV companies account for only 6 per cent of the network. Might a merged Carlton and Granada leave them alone?

In some respects the more important question is not who owns them but what the owners do with their control. Scottish has just announced a 25 per cent reduction in the number of 'regional' hours it is to broadcast. Despite reassuring noises from the Cowcaddens top brass about protecting regional identity, the inescapable thrust of the Government's legislation is to create a single ITV company whose prime obsession will be with the peak-time schedule. Local stations will become less important in branding terms and the number and quality of local programmes might suffer. The omens are not good for those who want serious, heavyweight news and current affairs.

A lot will depend on how seriously OFCOM, the proposed media watchdog, decides to take its regulatory role. The ITC, which currently has the role for independent television has failed miserably in its efforts to stop the TV companies from reducing the number of local programmes they broadcast. Quite the reverse in fact - they have actively conspired with the grey suits to the detriment of programme making.

The smart money will be on a single ITV with less identifiable branding of local stations. This is not good news for those

who want to see not only an expansion but better resourced local programming which can properly reflect the politics, culture and identity of the Scottish nation.

The second big issue in broadcasting (which doesn't stem from the Communication Bill) is whether BBC Scotland in the post devolution era can make a convincing case for a Scottish Six. The importance of this debate has hitherto been lost in a London versus the Scots struggle about coming to terms with devolution.

London has of course rejected the idea but will have to revisit it. In a sense, BBC Scotland won even although they lost the last argument. Programme makers at Queen Margaret Drive successfully managed to lever more money into Scotland for programme making. Newsnight Scotland was the sop to the Scottish Six hardliners. It has been a hit and miss affair, lacking the authority and gravitas of the main programme. In a sense it has been hindered by too narrow a remit and a Scottish Parliament news agenda which has been less than sparkling. But that is not to say it can't work.

BBC Scotland must be free from the constraints of putting kilts on UK and world stories. It has a large production base and a pool of reasonable talent. It should be allowed to get on with it.

Politically, of course, conceding a Scottish Six is seen as slippery slope nationalism. And for all this remains the nightmare of some, there is not a shred of evidence to suggest a Scottish Six would move people to independence. After all, three years into devolution and the settlement looks more like a cul de sac than a slippery slope.

The media are still trying to get to grips with devolved politics. Still trying to cope with Scotland going it alone on free personal care, tuition fees and McCrone without looking at these stories primarily in UDI terms and of their ability to embarrass Westminster. This is hardly surprising since the politicians are still getting to grips with the new politics. Labour wanted devolution but hadn't done sufficient work on what they wanted to do with it. The SNP wanted it as a stepping stone, without working out how it could become a springboard to Independence.

Hopefully the second term will bring more imagination from our politicians and more grown up reporting from our journalists. ■

In part the negative coverage has been a product of too many journalists sitting in their Lawnmarket offices with too few stories to cover

fringe disbenefits

Tommy Sheppard argues that cash is finally killing creativity on the fringe

Almost by accident the Edinburgh Festival Fringe started in 1947 when a number of companies unable to get in the new International Festival programme decided to stage performances in impromptu venues anyway. In the decades that followed it developed as a popular alternative to a high brow arts festival: a jamboree of artistic experiment and innovation. Those in charge would claim that this was never truer than today and that the spirit of the fringe is alive and well, with the festival open to anyone and welcoming all.

This is, of course, naïve nonsense. For many the Edinburgh Festival Fringe has now become the festival. It sells more tickets, generates more column inches, and brings in more millions to Scotland's capital than its official counterpart. It is in every sense a big business.

Fringe organisers may well imagine that they put up no barriers to anyone performing on the Fringe, but there is one enormous barrier - money. It costs more and more to mount a production on the Fringe. Anyone might think about it, but only the posh kids can afford it.

Mounting a show anywhere can't be done for nothing, and to some extent it is little surprise that it costs a lot in Edinburgh. On top of the usual production expenses, venues have to be hired and rigged from scratch, and accommodation found for the players in one of the most expensive cities in Europe in high season.

The Fringe theatre programme really only survives thanks to many companies having the support of the public purse through arts funding, or student societies relying on the support of their union. There are some, but not many, fully commercial theatre productions, but these are usually calculated to lose money, with the producer taking the view that a good Edinburgh run will help sell a tour of regional theatres already scheduled for later in the year. Often this works and it seems a not unreasonable plan. With professional theatre at least the people employed don't have to take the loss themselves with BECTU and Equity still able to get a living fee for their members.

That social trends of the last 20 years have influenced the world of the arts is unsurprising. Every aspect of our lives become more commercialised than ever before. More than ever we act as individual consumers in a market, we have been transformed into customers when once we were passengers, patients or students. Everything costs, nothing is free.

But it is with the comedy programme on the Fringe where commercial pressures have exerted their greatest effect

and the more light-hearted the production, the more serious the business of selling. There are important differences with the world of theatre.

To begin with there is little of the collective enterprise of a theatre production: solo performers without the benefit of union or any other support are the mainstay of the programme.

Secondly, comedy is fully commercial, it operates without subsidy of public support of any kind. Somebody always has to pay, and in the world of laughter it is the clowns who have to reach for their chequebooks.

Occasionally, promoters will pay for a production and performers fees will be guaranteed their fee, but really only in instances where the box office appeal of the artist is such that little or no risk is involved. For those not already bathed in fame and glory, there is a double whammy: not only will it be hard slog, often with thin houses and critical disapproval, but you will be asked to pay for it too.

And it doesn't come cheap. One comedian this year enquiring about putting on a show in one of the major fringe venues was told that the minimum it would cost him would be £12,000. The sums aren't hard to work out. At £8 a ticket you'd need to sell 1500 to cover this outlay. The venue in question had 80 seats so you would have to sell nearly 90 per cent of capacity to break even (and I'm not entirely sure if VAT ought not to be deducted from the receipts first). Unknown artists do not sell out every night, and so the reality is that after a month's hard graft - never mind the time and effort to write and rehearse the show - the unsuspecting performer is likely to end up owing their promoter money, sometimes a great deal of money.

Comedy production costs are greatly inflated by the price of hype. Every summer a mini-public relations industry comes to town as promoters large and small spend fortunes on publicists and print. You'd think the performers with the most talent would rise to the fore. Think again. Working on the tried and tested shit sticks theory, the more times the you can get a performer mentioned in the press or their name displayed in public, the more chance there is they'll get noticed. Most people have never heard of most of these acts: the best con is to promote a name so hard that people begin to think they ought to have heard of them due simply to the scale of the publicity.

This is what happens. The most obvious question is why on earth do people do it. The answer has little if anything to do with artistic experiment and endeavour. For some,

it is something they need to get out of their system. Once bitten, twice shy. For others on the professional entertainment circuit is quite simply a cost worth bearing in the hope of greater rewards. Put simply, it is still worth losing thousands on a fringe show in the hope of getting noticed by those in a position to employ you later, or in the hope of pushing up the fees you can command by getting critical attention from the media and the industry.

The comedy programme of the fringe is the most ruthless of trade fairs. Which brings us to who is doing the buying. With most theatre productions the buyers might be a local authority venue director looking for a new production, or the organiser of community arts festival looking for something new and exciting for their programme.

Stand up comedy is the medium from which the doyens of light entertainment are recruited in today's world of low budget television. And it is the producers of British broadcasting - itself the badly hurt victim of privatisation and cut-throat budgeting - who set the rules of the game.

The rewards aren't great - but they're enough for people to consider making a huge financial risk. Presenting a reformatted US gameshow on Channel Five or cable won't make you a millionaire but it will pay the mortgage thanks very much and in a working environment where job security is a stranger, that'll do for now.

The Fringe is a very competitive environment and talent is not necessarily near the top of list of attributes that ensure you win. Providing the impetus is the phenomenon of the comedy competition, a plethora of which now infest the fringe. Based on the entirely dubious premise that one act is funnier than another - when in reality different people find different things funny - these contests set young performers against each other and create hundreds of losers for each winner.

A macabre symbiosis now exists between the promoters and agents and the various awards and baubles for which they compete. On the one hand the competition organisers will be keen to spot winners - in the sense of people who

will make it in the business. The likes of the Perrier award seek to justify their worth by reference to famous household names who have won it in the past. On the other hand the agents use the endorsement of competitions - a placing will do - to add spin to their boy (it is usually a boy) or girl.

And so a culture is created that is antipathetic to innovation and artistic experiment. The pressure is on to play safe, to try to second guess what the competition judges might want. In turn the competition judges will be second guessing who might actually make it in the big bad world in order to validate their competition.

Regrettably the fringe office goes out of its way to validate this nonsense - going so far as to endorse and promote the Perrier in its own publications free of charge.

But it is not only the process of appeasing a self important light entertainment establishment that mitigates against artistic risk, there is the very real problem of money too. No-one can afford to lay out the sort of money that a fringe production now takes on a show the public might not like. So there is a very real commercial pressure to stick to established formulae, to play safe. Conversely, since high costs have forced up ticket prices, the punters can't afford to take a risk either.

When I first started coming to the fringe in the '70s and '80s you would cram in as many shows as you could in the shortest possible time. Prices were modest and if something was crap, so be it, it only costs the price of a pint. These days, with ticket

prices at £10, no-one wants to be obliged with that risk.

So what can be done about this sorry state of affairs? Firstly, the fringe organisers could recognise the problem and try to redress the commercial pressures that are now inbuilt in the system. They could encourage sponsors to genuinely help fund productions rather than engage in cheap brand marketing exercises as at present.

Secondly, there needs to be a realisation that the fringe cannot simply go on expanding forever. There are only so many people who can be in Edinburgh in August - there is a physical limit to how many can be accommodated. As

No-one can afford to lay out the sort of money that a fringe production now takes on a show the public might not like - there is a very real pressure to play safe. Conversely, since high costs have forced up ticket prices, the punters can't afford to take a risk either.

the number of shows increases, as it has every year, so the audience is spread ever thinner. A small number of well-kent names will always siphon off the bulk the potential audience leaving everyone else with a paucity of punters. The result is thin audiences, depressing shows, and a bigger financial loss.

I am not suggesting that the fringe organisers should censor what productions take place. The simplest limitation would be to limit the number of venues, and to set a maximum number of shows each venue can stage. Most seats are controlled by a small cartel of promoters who have an incentive to convert every disused warehouse and cellar into makeshift performance spaces which are then rented by the hour. Limiting the number of productions staged in any one venue would help break existing monopolies and truly breathe democracy into the organisation of the fringe. It would also be better for

audiences, who wouldn't be shoehorned in and out of barely adequate temporary theatres as they are at present.

A venue development programme to help bring on new venues and share the quota of productions around, combined with shifting the emphasis towards support for independent companies, would make the fringe more accessible and diverse.

Finally, a more equal system of registration fees should be introduced based on the ability to pay. At the moment the big promoters are laughing all the way to the bank as they pay the same flat registration fee irrespective of the prices they charge and how many tickets they sell. A contribution to the festival that was related to how much people make out of it might upset the big promoters but it would be a damn sight fairer. ■

Tommy Sheppard is the Director of The Stand Comedy Club in Edinburgh

web review

Henry McCubbin

Oh boy, socialism and culture. Stalin's view was simple. The artists knew that they had to portray the revolution as directed by Stalin as a glorious success and no subtleties please. The Bolsheviks rather fancied releasing the artists a little by encouraging them to follow a theme to promote the struggle of mankind's liberation. Trotsky cried rubbish, you can't control artists, let them do their thing because they will do it anyway.

These arguments surrounding Soviet heroic art have stained perceptions of socialist and working class culture. A basic division between Soviet and socialist art movements must be that the socialist version does not accept a hierarchy of art. In this it also separates itself from ethnocentric, national, regional or historical superiorities of particular art forms in general. Raymond Williams, perhaps the greatest modern socialist commentator on culture, admits that it is one of the three most complicated words in the English language. To ease the problems in defining culture he quotes Herder:

"Men of all quarters of the globe, who have perished over the ages, you have not lived solely to manure the earth with your ashes, so that the at the end of time your posterity should be made happy by European culture. The very thought of a superior European culture is a blatant insult to the majesty of Nature."

Where can we look for this great diversity? Try Chelmsford Trades Council website to start with. (Why can't one

of our Scottish Trades Councils take on this task in Scotland?) It has some useful links to other international sites, mainly American, with some excellent images - www.chelmsfordtuc.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/culture.html

From a Scottish folk perspective try the Greentrax site www.greentrax.com/artists.htm. This record company hosts many Scottish artists including Dick Gaughan who has his own site at www.dickalba.demon.co.uk and Eric Bogle at www.stoneyport.demon.co.uk. Another site with left leaning artists is www.st-and.ac.uk/~cab7/FolkFolk.html.

You may also be interested in www.socialistfuture.org.uk which provides reviews on art exhibitions and other cultural events. The name George Galloway pops up in the credits. Credit due to him to sponsoring it.

Do you like agitprop? Then try www.qbradley.freeserve.co.uk/website6/struggle6.html where you will find some excellent posters and drawings by Walter Crane. I mentioned Soviet heroic art above, well we couldn't ignore it could we? Here it is at www.ukraineart.com/artinfo.htm.



Samual Peep's Diary



Much has been made in the media of the poor performances of some of our MSPs. The Scottish Parliament is certainly not a throwback to the days of flowery oratory. Some Minister's even struggle to read their speeches. Minister for Parliament Patricia Ferguson is particularly high in the stutter stakes. In one of her recent outings, she even looked as if her finger was being run under each word in a style which wouldn't be out of place in a primary school. At this point, Kenny Gibson, the SNP list member for Glasgow was heard to audibly repeat 'the cat sat on the mat, the cat sat on the mat'.

It is not just Patricia Ferguson who has to put up with barbed comments from the opposition benches. Her deputy Euan Robson was particularly busy one afternoon. On no fewer than four occasions his Parliamentary utterances amounted to 'Presiding officer, I formally move'. This brought the heckle from the opposition benches 'another good days work Euan'.

These are not good days for Margaret Jamieson. The Kilmarnock MSP ran into a spot of bother over her decision to sign a ten year confidentiality agreement with an American drugs company, ahead of a planned Parliamentary visit. But Jamieson proved during the stooshie that she is thick skinned. Not surprisingly really as a tale from the mound demonstrates. A couple of months after being elected she was asked how she was settling in by a fellow MSP from Ayrshire. 'Settling in' opined the honourable member 'I haven't had time to scratch ma erse'.

Among the less well known facts about life in the Parliament is that MSPs can avail themselves of the services of a representative of Weight Watchers. Govan Labour MSP

Gordon Jackson has just started a healthy eating regime. Pints of lager have been replaced by white wine and soda. Bread and butter and puddings are all off the menu. If you see Big Gordon looking pleased with himself these days it's because after three weeks of healthy eating he is thirteen pounds lighter. But can a man, who normally greets a tray of cocktails sausages and pies with the message 'Ah shouldn't really' (before devouring them), keep this up. The Diary will keep you posted.

The Brass Neck(s) of the month award goes to a motley crew of political journalists who should be ashamed ever to utter the words junket and free-loading ever again. Why? Well each year a golf match takes place between parliamentarians and hacks. Last year the politicians triumphed at Gleneagles. This year the hacks got their revenge. Sponsorship was found (from Glenmorangie among others) which transported a pack of journalists including (Brian Taylor (BBC) Michael Crowe (STV) Murray Ritchie (The Herald) and Hamish MacDonnell (The Scotsman) to the north of Scotland. Free train tickets were laid on, as was accommodation at Skibo Castle for two nights, two free rounds of golf, a dinner and a hooly at a distillery. All for free. Let's hope none of them go into politics. With these habits they won't last long. ■



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