

# From scenes like these: new writing at Glasgow Unity Theatre

By Adrienne Scullion

Glasgow Unity Theatre (1941-1951) was one of the most significant theatre companies in the history of Scottish theatre – a theatre group of tangible social and political purpose and significant cultural distinctiveness. In what it did and how it did it Glasgow Unity influenced later Scottish theatre companies – including 7:84 Theatre Company (Scotland) and Clyde Unity Theatre – while its splendid catalogue of new writing redefined the repertoire of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Scottish drama.

In a project planned by scholar Bill Findlay but, following his [Findlay's] untimely death in 2005, brought to realisation by fellow academic Randall Stevenson, a new book anthologises four of Glasgow Unity's better known new plays, along with one other by a writer closely associated with the company, publishing some for the first time. While the collection's introduction provides a useful summary of the story of the company it is, appropriately, the plays themselves that make a strong argument for the significance of Glasgow Unity in shaping modern Scottish drama.

Elements common across all five of the plays – contemporary, urban settings, narratives of groups and/or extended families, stories of social immediacy and relevance, and vibrant vernacular language driven by an immediate urban Scots – establish some of the key tropes of modern Scottish drama, a point reiterated by the introduction which draws parallels between the Glasgow Unity writers of the 1940s and the new generation of writers associated with the Royal Lyceum and Traverse in the 1970s.

In winter 1940 the coalition of five of Glasgow's leading amateur theatre companies – the

Glasgow Workers' Theatre Group, the Clarion Players, the Glasgow Players (an evolution of the Scottish College Players), the Glasgow Corporation Transport Players and the Glasgow Jewish Institute Players – formed the new company of Glasgow Unity Theatre. The five existing Glasgow companies pooled their resources primarily because of shortages caused by the war but, in so doing, drew together some of the best performers, directors,

writers and designers working in Glasgow at the time: these were ordinary young people brought together by a determination to make good theatre which also demonstrated a strong social conscience. As one of the company's directors, Robert Mitchell, declared: 'What we are trying to create is a native theatre, something which is essentially reflecting the ordinary lives of the ordinary people in Scotland.' (1946) While this new book acknowledges and draws on some existing work into the infrastructural and operational aspects of the company as well as its place within wider Scottish theatre culture,

its particular focus on the plays that the company produced and promoted is both distinctive and valuable.

Glasgow Unity produced an international repertoire of plays by Clifford Odets, Sean O'Casey, Maxim Gorky, Aleksandr Afinogenov, Vsevolod Vishnevsky and Herman Heijermans alongside what this anthology shows was an increasingly powerful raft of new Scottish writing that drew on contemporary and immediate working-class and urban contexts. Its best-known homegrown writers were James Barke, Ena Lamont Stewart, Robert MacLeish and



Benedick Scott, the latter three of whom feature in Findlay's selection.

Within a context where Odets, O'Casey and Gorky were celebrated – and where there was even experimentation with plays by Ibsen – it comes as no surprise to find that Unity's politically motivated stage embraced the expectation of theatrical and dramaturgical realism. Glasgow Unity's first new play was the Communist shipyard worker and best-selling novelist – and Glasgow Unity's Chair – James Barke. Dating from 1941, Barke's adaptation of his own 1936 novel *Major Operation* was an early new writing success of the company. Its plot – during a stay in hospital a middle-class Glasgow coal agent is converted to socialism by a fellow patient, an unemployed militant shipyard worker, and later dies under the hooves of a police horse during a demonstration in George Square in the centre of Glasgow – is, perhaps, overly melodramatic but it is very significantly set in Glasgow (the play is vitalised by many references to districts, streets and shops which would have been familiar to the Glasgow audience) and there is ample opportunity to introduce audiences to and educate them within left politics – although caustic Glasgow humour leavens what might be seen as the play's didacticism. Barke continued to provide Glasgow Unity with new plays: *The Night of the Big Blitz* (1944), set against a backdrop of the bombing of Clydebank; *When the Boys Come Home* (1945), set in a Clydeside shipyard, but interwoven with words and scenes of Karl Marx, Robert Burns, Jean Armour and Rob Roy; and *Her Name was Barbara Allen* (1946), a contemporary comedy with an atypical small-town setting. Barke's plays – along with John Kincaid's *Song of Tomorrow* (1943), a play about a strike by aircraft workers – are an interesting sub-set of Unity's new dramas which together debated and analysed the impact of World War II and, in particular, the Clydebank blitz on the working class population of Glasgow.

The War impacted on the fortunes of Glasgow Unity in other ways too. Direct state subsidy for the arts began in Britain in 1940 as a temporary measure to boost civilian morale during wartime – specifically in the context of the London Blitz – with the scheme being administered by the Committee for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA). In 1942 CEMA established a Scottish committee. Almost immediately the playwright James Bridie was invited to join and take responsibility for drama. Bridie saw the potential of this new organisation to realise his ambition to establish an independent producing theatre in Glasgow – CEMA provided £1,500

as a guarantee against loss which calmed the reservations of the commercial community that provided the capital to launch, in 1943, the Citizens' Theatre.

There is a tension between Bridie's vision for his municipal rep and Unity's increasing commitment to a 'Scottish People's Theatre'. But with these two very different companies, with very different cultural projects operating in Glasgow at the same time, there was a remarkable energy at work in Scottish theatre. The potential for this dynamic to flourish into active dialectic was, however, constrained by the discrepancy in financial support afforded each company. The Citizens' was launched with significant pomp and tangible support from both the Arts Council and municipal government. In contrast Unity struggled to win consistent and institutional support of any kind. Specifically – and foreshadowing more recent cultural policy debates in Scotland the England – critics have argued that the Arts Council was fearful of what one historian has termed as the 'taint of Unity's political commitment' and used the company's left agenda as an excuse to refuse subsidy.

But there is another important point of contrast. At the Citizens' 'new Scottish writing' tended to mean new plays by Bridie, who was certainly the most successful of contemporary Scottish playwrights in terms of a sustained producing career in London and, eventually, Scotland too. Unity, while also maintaining an interest in an international repertoire, was also committed to developing and supporting writing from their group of local writers. What distinguished the work of Glasgow Unity in this post-war period is the remarkable series of new Scottish plays that the company premiered. Indeed, in reviewing the influence of the two companies during the 1940s the reputation of Unity for producing new and relevant and contemporary dramas stands head and shoulders above Bridie's Citizens'.

Unity's most celebrated catalogue of original writing begins in 1945 with Ena Lamont Stewart's play about life in a large Glasgow hospital, *Starched Aprons* (1945), a remarkable play with a cast of some 30 speaking parts, most of them for women. It has its melodramatic moments but it also allows for important issues to be raised about the role of women within the work force, about class, poverty, and the very real fear of illness brought on by deprivation – poor housing and malnutrition – as well as dealing confidently with issues of sex and sexuality. However, the very real popular successes of Barke's *Major Operation*, Stewart's *Starched Aprons* and the





company's Scots version of Gorky's *The Lower Depths* (1945) were all-but eclipsed with the phenomenal popular and commercial triumph achieved by Robert McLeish's play *The Gorbals Story*, the earliest of the plays included in Findlay's anthology. Set in the kitchen of an over-crowded tenement flat, McLeish's play tells the story of the eight families who live there and the ambition one young man has to leave this deprived environment. Its dark humour, interwoven with scenes of barely concealed violence and moments of lush sentimentalism, is a powerful, successful and increasingly familiar mix within Scottish popular theatre.

While the play presents a vibrant mix of ethnic and religious groups – a Catholic and a Protestant family, a Highlander and a Pakistani peddler – its socialist purpose ensures that a sense of a working-class community effaces potential social and cultural differences. There is, however, little by way of plot development, instead McLeish presents a series of scenes, conversations, meetings and encounters in which characters come and go or linger to chat and dream of escape and fulfilment. While its commercial achievements provided much needed income for Glasgow Unity, McLeish's play was also a significant social and political success, drawing the public's attention to problems of poverty and unemployment, poor housing and homelessness.

Glasgow Unity had touched a nerve. Audiences, particularly its local Glasgow audience, were excited by this new, realistic, urban drama, its determined humour and its passionate demand for social justice. The company too felt inspired by such work and actively sought more new plays written in similar vein.

Of all the new plays commissioned and produced by Glasgow Unity, it is really only Ena Lamont Stewart's second play, *Men Should Weep* (1947) – according to the playwright 'written in response to a request from Unity for a play of working-class life from the woman's angle' (1947) – which has retained both its reputation and a foothold within the Scottish repertoire. Since its 1982 revival by 7:84 (Scotland), *Men Should Weep* has been acknowledged as one of Scottish drama's most important plays. The play reconsiders some of the themes of *Starved Aprons* – poverty and illness, women as the centre of the community, unemployment, homelessness – and resets them within the context of a domestic setting and the conventions of a family melodrama, with a group of women placed very deliberately at the heart of the narrative and the community. The play underlines Glasgow Unity's commitment to the radical potential of social realism and the effect is quite unforgettable. Despite the play's strong message of social justice, for many theatre-goers, and for many readers, the most vivid features are the characters and, in particular, Maggie Morrison, the strong and noble central figure, struggling to support her family in an ill-equipped and over-crowded tenement flat. Although



certainly the best known of the plays in Findlay's anthology, its inclusion is particularly significant as it appears here for the first time with its original ending which makes it a much bleaker affair than the better known version used for its 1982 revival.

The anthology also includes the lesser-known *Gold in His Boots* by George Munro (1947), a play about a brilliant young footballer whose talent takes him away from working-class poverty but whose family and social ties pull him back. The play's themes of working-class identity, of the violence that poverty might breed, of talent and of ambition, of family and the place of men and women therein, are strongly articulated even if the dramas themselves sometime veer towards the mawkish and the sentimental.

The final significant new play produced by Glasgow Unity is also anthologised by Findlay and it is *The Lambs of God* by Benedick Scott. It is an extraordinary account of sexual politics in the context of small-town Scotland. It failed completely when it was first performed in Glasgow in 1948 but, through its 1986 revival by the nascent Clyde Unity Theatre – a Glasgow-based company who borrowed both the name and the social purpose from the earlier company – has now been recognised as an exciting and inspiring contribution to 20<sup>th</sup>-century Scottish drama. On one level it is a sentimental account of working-class homosexuality; but on another it has a distinctive metaphysical aspect – the struggle between good and evil for the soul of a young man. The play is amazingly poetical with strange chorus-like characters watching and commenting on the action.

The original Glasgow Unity production of *The Lambs of God* failed in some respects because the actors were uneasy about and ill equipped to perform the demanding nature of the drama, with its overt engagement with dangerous and illicit sex and sexuality, and complex mix of realistic and poetic languages. In addition, Unity's production methods were essentially Stanislavskian and emphasised realism. This may have suited plays like *Men Should Weep* and *The Gorbals Story* but failed with others, such as *The Lambs of God*. Spectacular Unity failures also included Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* (1946) and the premiere of Robert McLellan's *The Flouers o' Edinburgh* (1948) – a wicked satire on the 18<sup>th</sup>-century fashion of employing tutors to rid the members of Edinburgh's fashionable society of their Scottish accents: the players were simply not equipped to deal with the sophistication of the former or the linguistic and

comic demands required of the latter. Realism, originally so relevant, so refreshing, so inspiring, ultimately became a dramaturgical and, indeed, ideological straitjacket, and constrained the development of a company that was, in any case, beginning to falter.

Many reasons have been suggested for the demise of Unity. The most emotive proffered is one that further demonises contemporary playwright and director James Bridie, but as the director of the Citizens' put it: 'Unity has as many Achilles' heels as a centipede'. It is suggested that, in order to protect his own company, he encouraged the Arts Council to cut its meagre support of Unity. There is probably at least a degree of truth in this accusation but even as Unity failed, Bridie – ever the pragmatist – employed many of its actors at the Citizens'. Finally, however, it was financial mismanagement, combined with the negative attitude of the Arts Council, that hastened Unity's disbandment, which finally occurred in 1951. The company had survived just one decade, but within that time had forged a theatre and a drama of unique political conscience and social responsibility.

Although the termination of Unity was certainly to the detriment of Scottish theatre, its influence continued. Its members redistributed themselves across many other companies and many other areas of Scottish cultural life and this enriched the arts scene generally. Tom MacDonald continued to work as a theatre designer and fine artist, being associated with Scottish Opera from 1965 to 1975. Elizabeth Low, who had also designed for the company, developed an international reputation for work within the Scottish art scene. Edward Boyd became one of Scottish television's most significant early writers, responsible for the ground-breaking series *The View from Daniel Pike* (1971). Stanley Baxter, Bertha Cooper, Archie Duncan, Russell Hunter, Andrew Keir, Roddy McMillan, Duncan Macrae, Oscar Lewenstein, Ida Schuster and Marjorie Thomson emerge as a generation of huge significance within Scottish theatre – some of the first native professional actors in Scotland in the modern period – as well as within British theatre as a whole. Roddy McMillan is the final playwright whose work is included in this new book. *All in Good Faith*, a play of family and tenement life very much in the Glasgow Unity mould but set in the post-war era and challenging the mythology of 'a land fit for heroes', was produced in 1954, three years after Glasgow Unity folded. The company that produced McMillan's play, with a cast list filled with Glasgow Unity veterans, was the Citizens'.



But despite these designers and actors continuing to work in contemporary theatre, television and film, what followed was close to three decades in which the plays were neglected. In the 1970s 7:84, under the artistic directorship of John McGrath, recreated a Scottish political theatre. This was a theatre that encouraged and developed new relevant and immediate writing, and was essentially committed to touring. In addition, and by leading the recovery of Scotland's theatrical past, he and archivist Linda Mackenney also sought to prove the significance of a Scottish tradition of left theatre. Their work uncovering the left-wing plays, playwrights and companies of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s came together in 7:84's hugely influential 'Clydebuilt' season in 1982. A particular strength of the 'Clydebuilt' project was the combination of contemporary theatre practice and historical inquiry. So in addition to revivals of *Gold in his Boots*, Joe Corrie's *In Time o' Strife* (1927), Ewan MacColl's *Johnny Noble* (1946) and, most influentially of all, Giles Havergal's production of a revised version of *Men Should Weep*, the 'Clydebuilt' season saw the publication of a number of core plays, printed in volumes that included other primary sources such as contemporary reviews, interviews and photographs. This 'Clydebuilt' season encouraged a new audience for these plays and inspired significant academic interest in the

period that is reflected in the scholarship behind Findlay's anthology.

The legacy of Glasgow Unity is varied. It provided early opportunities for a diverse range of theatre makers. It demanded that relevant Scottish theatre served a clearly defined working-class audience that was predominantly, if not quite exclusively, urban. It sought out its audience in tours and seasons that fitted the demands of this preferred audience. And, as Findlay's new volume makes very clear, it is associated with a raft of vital plays that confronted and described the harsh realities of life in Scotland in the 1940s. Its plays demonstrated the potential for sentiment, humour, naturalism and localism in telling stories of and for these communities and groups and they are fitting testament to a company that subsequent left-wing theatre makers and critics could hold up as an ideal of committed, relevant and Scottish political theatre.

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