

James Bridie: The devil's in the detail

By Adrienne Scullion

A favourite question for students of Scottish theatre and drama asks if the reputations of the most (commercially) successful of Scotland's playwrights – J M Barrie (1860-1937) and James Bridie (1888-1951) – can be salvaged. The frequent 'answer' is that, whilst there is potential for both criticism and practicing theatre to recover Barrie as a playwright, such a route is lost to Bridie: it is in recognising his influence in shaping a modern – and crucially a professional – Scottish theatre culture that there is any hope of recovering his reputation.

The case for Barrie is indeed strong: Andrew Birkin's mining of the Barrie archive led to important and high profile biographies, including the television series *The Lost Boys* (1978), and continues to influence more contemporary texts such as Marc Forster's *Finding Neverland* (2004) and Rodrigo Fresán's *Kensington Gardens* (2005); significant modern productions of his plays – *Peter Pan* (1904) by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1982 and *What Every Woman Knows* (1908) at West Yorkshire Playhouse in 1991 – as well as scholarly engagement, led by R D S Jack, have all contributed to raising Barrie's profile as a playwright of current interest. The same cannot be said of Bridie who is doubly damned by a quixotic and old-fashioned dramaturgy and by a reputation for promoting establishment cultural values and institutions at the expense of other practitioners with alternative, perhaps even counter-cultural, objectives. If the *douce* celebrations of his centenary year of 1988 – when several Scotland's theatre companies revived his plays and there was a major exhibition devoted to his work at the National Library of Scotland – generated little by way of rehabilitation either on the stage or by way of new critical work, then it is questionable whether Gerard Carruthers's new collection of five of Bridie's plays – his first produced play *The Sunlight Sonata* (1928), his best known play *The Anatomist* (1930), his most commercially successful *Daphne Laureola* (1949), his most frequently revived *Mr Bolfry* (1943) and *A Sleeping Clergyman* (1933), the most critically praised of the plays produced in his lifetime – is enough to generate renewed interest, recovery or re-appraisal of this 'bygone grandee of middle-class Scottish culture' (Carruthers, p. ix).

And yet Carruthers is confident in his ambition for Bridie the playwright. With the exception of *The Sunlight Sonata* – included as a key staging post in the development of Bridie the writer – Carruthers proposes that the other four plays – along with several others – are ripe for revival, asserting, rather against the critical orthodoxy, that Bridie's writing is 'actually no more ponderous than the work of a Samuel Beckett or a Harold Pinter' (Carruthers, p.

xiii). In support of this view Carruthers proposes that the plays have dramatic, and even gripping, stories, with varied dialogue and characterisation deployed in credible human tragedies and comedies. And yet despite these seeming strengths, there has only been a smattering of modern revivals of his work in Scotland – the centenary revivals, *Mr Bolfry* at Pitlochry (1996), *The Anatomist* at the Lyceum (1999) – and none has unsettled the general ennui of critical disinterestedness that surrounds Bridie the playwright.

Bridie's writing career straddles an emergent professional theatre culture in Scotland and the evolved theatre industry of the West End. As noted, his first performed play was *The Sunlight Sonata*, presented by the amateur group the Scottish National Players, directed by Tyrone Guthrie, in 1928. In pursuit of professional production much of his writing in the 1930s and 1940s was centred on London and starry productions in the West End. His record there includes *Mary Read* (1934) with Flora Robson and Robert Donat; *The King of Nowhere* (1938) with Laurence Olivier; *Mr Bolfry* (1943), *Dr Angelus* (1947) and *Mr Gillie* (1950) with Alastair Sim; and, Edith Evans and Peter Finch in *Daphne Laureola* (1949). With the founding of the Citizens' Theatre in Glasgow in 1943, however, he increasingly wrote for the emergent Scottish theatre for which he produced some of his best work including *The Forrigan Reel* (1944), *The Queen's Comedy* (1950) and *The Baikie Charivari* (1952).

Bridie's dramas may be broadly categorised as 'problem plays', for example, *The Anatomist* (1930); contemporary renderings of biblical stories such as *Tobias and the Angel* (1930); and, fantasies, often centred upon a devil figure, such as *The Sunlight Sonata*, *Mr Bolfry* and *The Baikie Charivari*. As these categories might suggest much of his output of plays was dedicated to the fight between good and evil, and many also tackle the hypocrisy and evasion of the Scottish middle-class. Throughout Bridie's moral message is disquieting and tinged black. In the 'farce-morality' *The Sunlight Sonata*, the first play in Carruthers's anthology, Beelzebub, speaking in a rich Ayrshire dialect, fights for the very soul of Kelvinside, only to be thwarted by virtuous maiden aunts and economical plain cooks. *Daphne Laureola* – the last of Carruthers's selection – is part tragic-comedy and, again, part morality tale. The plot is slight and the narrative allusive rather than direct: a young man's obsession with an older woman in the very contemporary setting of post-war London resonates with the mythical Apollo's obsession with the nymph Daphne, presciently transformed by Gaea into a laurel tree before she could be seduced. In this use of allusion *Daphne Laureola's* contemporary vernacular



and contextual naturalism is edged with the devices familiar from the contemporary poetic drama of T S Eliot and Christopher Fry. Given that, it is indeed arguable that some features of the Bridie's dramaturgy, perhaps hinted at in these categories and comparisons, offer potential routes for contemporary criticism. For example, it may be that a psychoanalytical approach, or reference to magic realism, might unlock his interweaving of the modern and the everyday with the mythical, the legendary or the supernatural.

The question of dramaturgical technique, however, is more than just an academic quibble. In her book on Bridie, Winifred Bannister tells of the rehearsals at Malvern for *A Sleeping Clergyman*. The play electrified the theatre's staff with its mixture of emotional violence, murder and drunkenness, but appalled the theatre's founder Sir Barry Jackson, who was sure that if it pleased the cleaners then it was too vulgar for his patrons: 'His feeling about this play was similar to that of [...] others about *The Anatomist* before it came in contact with the audience – that here was something too raw, too violent, for civilised consumption.'

But there are other reasons why Bridie has been neglected. Perhaps the most obvious negative feature of his plays for present-day audiences and critics is his sexual politics and, in particular, his treatment of women. In the decades since Bridie's death women's role in society, especially the role of the middle-class women about whom Bridie writes most frequently, has changed beyond all recognition. Even the last female characters he created in 1951 – Judy and Baby in *The Baikie Charivari* – could simply not be written today. There is an unrecoverable shock at the moment when Baby – and, of course, even her name suggests her status in the family – is given away to the first half-decent plumber's mate who happens to come through the door. (In contrast when Maggie Wylie is bartered in *What Every Woman Knows* Barrie gives enough evidence in the stage directions to undercut the moment; in *The Baikie Charivari* the 'arranged marriage' is too sudden and raw for comfort.)

Having no professional companies with whom he could work hampered Bridie's early writing, and he focused much of his writing career on the West End. For this reason, and when seen from Scotland Bridie may appear a traitor – one of Barrie's 'Scotsmen on the make' – but the view from London is no less contentious, at best casting him as an exotic, at worst ignoring him altogether. As Carruthers's Introduction underlines, when histories of the London stage of the 1930s and 1940s came to be written, Bridie's work merited very few, if any, lines, and, when mentioned at

all was usually bracketed with Priestley as a dramatist of ideas, or with Emyln Williams as a peripheral Celt. Despite a significant contemporary profile, Bridie's plays for London in the 1930s are, with few exceptions – *A Sleeping Clergyman* is one – uncomfortable, messy creations. But his plays for and of Scotland – *The Anatomist*, *Holy Isle* (1943), *The Forrigan Reel* – achieve linguistic resonance and are distinctive in their abilities to combine the quotidian with the fantastical. Despite this oddly contemporary dialectic Bridie remains a critical marginal figure in dramatic history.

Initially Bridie's posthumous reputation suffered in parallel with a general tendency to cast key figures of the interwar period – Eliot, Fry, J B Priestley, Noel Coward, Somerset Maugham, Terrence Rattigan – into a post-1956 theatrical limbo. Of these only Coward, and perhaps also Maugham and Rattigan, are well on the road to critical rehabilitation and a presence in contemporary British repertory and commercial theatre: all three racily setting plays in the *demi-monde* and dramatising illicit and illegal behaviour with suitably acid comment. One factor in their recovery has been a political determination to recover and celebrate gay writers and texts. Set against this discourse, Bridie's plays are irredeemably heterosexual and middle-class with little of the sexual sub-text of Rattigan or Maugham, let alone the bravado and camp Coward. While Bridie's plays have a wealth of witty dialogue and dry asides, many of his jokes rely on a humour which needs a particular audience: they need an audience socially, culturally and educationally

like the majority of theatre-goers in the 1930s and 1940s, specifically an audience literate in Classical and Biblical texts. With this in mind it would be idle to argue that Bridie was a playwright for all Scotland, but he was the dramatist of a substantial and influential section of Scottish society at a particular point in history.

Carruthers – the literary scholar rather than the theatre historian – may be seen to overstate the potential of a revival of the plays. Although Carruthers conspicuously underplays Bridie's role in the establishment and operation of the Citizens', he is, nevertheless, correct to highlight Bridie's significance in the repertoire of mid-century British theatre and to propose his real influence as a 'cultural activist [...] ushering in a new age of professionalism' to Scottish cultural life (pp. ix-x). In short, in the inter-war period, Bridie dominated Scottish theatre as both a writer and a manager and policy-maker; and it is as regards the latter roles, and his influence in shaping a modern Scottish theatre culture, that Bridie's reputation might be upheld.



Bridie was, in terms of profile and production success at least, one of the leading British playwrights of his generation. Reflecting the systems and structures of 20th-century British theatre culture, it was the authority of a professional career in theatre and, more particularly, a career legitimised by success in London that marked him out above other theatre makers in Scotland at the time. Significantly, Bridie used this authority to bend theatre in Scotland towards his preferred vision. This is most obviously the case in respect of the Citizens' Theatre in Glasgow that he founded in 1943. As a publicly subsidised, municipally organised rep, Bridie's new theatre attracted the cream of Scotland's nascent professional acting community and provided a new production context for his own plays – notably *Holy Isle*, *The Forrigan Reel*, *The Queen's Comedy* and *The Baikie Charivari*. But Bridie's influence was greater than this one company. As the first chairman of the Scottish Committee of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (established in 1942, and subsequently the Scottish Committee of the Arts Council of Great Britain) he courted controversy by supporting the Citizens' over the longer established – and demonstrably left-wing – Glasgow Unity Theatre: it is with some justification that he is seen as culpable in the painful demise of that company. Towards the end of his life, he was instrumental in the establishment of the College of Dramatic Art in 1950, now part of the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama in Glasgow. In short, he directly influenced – and even shaped – some of the institutions that remain the building blocks of modern Scottish theatre.

Viewed from Scotland – and whatever his professional faults and shortcomings – Bridie was a playwright of national significance whose work, and the lessons of whose life as regards the position of the dramatist in society, we ignore at our peril.

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