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Scottish Women Playwrights against Zero Visibility

New Voices Breaking Through

Women playwrights have always been an important creative force in Scottish theatre, and though they may have been in minority, their voices rose above the social constrictions of the society they lived in. In the past centuries, many wrote anonymously, mostly for family entertainment, but there were also those who had their plays published either under their own name or a pseudonym. One only has to remember Joanna Baillie (1762-1835), native of Bothwell in Lanarkshire, whose historio-biographical play *De Montford* was produced at Drury Lane in 1800, with Sarah Siddons and John Philip Kemble in the main roles. A century later, the authors such as Naomi Mitchison (1897-1999), Ada F. Kay (aka A. J. Stewart) and Ena Lamont Stewart (1912-) were hailed as representatives of a small but significant number of women dramatists whose work focused on the positionality of women in family and society at large. These dramatists wrote about domesticity, femininity and gender struggle in predominately patriarchal Scottish society long before early feminist movements began to identify and systematise their ideological agendas

Out of the three, Naomi Mitchison is better known as a novelist and a poet, however, she also wrote plays which nowadays often take the back seat to her other writing output. Like many of her contemporaries, she had a keen interest in Scottish history and published a collection of *History Plays for Schools* (1939). In the aftermath of the world war, many authors turned to historical and social themes trying to make sense of the changing world around them, and revisit the way Scotland's past was perceived at home and abroad. Ada F. Kay turned to these topics, gaining international acclaim with *The Man from Thermopylae* (1959), a powerful allegory on the human condition set against the background of ancient Spartans' fateful battle against Persian armies in 479 BC, and *March Home Tomorrow*

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(1964). One of the most significant women authors in the post-war Scotland, her work was rarely performed after the late 1950s. Ena Lamont Stewart, a prolific author with the pendant for plays with a socialist bite, suffered similar fate. In her early plays *Starched Aprons* (1945), and *Men Should Weep* (1947) Lamont Stewart explored the lives of working class women in Edinburgh's closed society, was only revived in the 1970s after her play *Business in Edinburgh* received dramatised reading at the Citizens Theatre in Glasgow in 1970, and in particular after her 1976 revision of the original setting of *Starched Aprons* to an earlier era of 1920s, in order to emphasize the nostalgia of the piece, was produced. Her popularity was finally cemented by the revival of *Men Should Weep* in May 1982 by 7:84 Scotland, and directed by Giles Havergal. Lamont Stewart's, Kay's and Mitchison's plays are inherently embedded in the state of Scottish psyche, and are a powerful testament for that time's quest for national and social identity. Soon, they would be joined by another woman playwright whose appearance on the Scottish theatre scene in the 1960s marked stylistic and thematic change. Concerned with individual struggle of a woman to be recognized in phallogocentric society, she brought onto the stage personal considerations, from female perspective, through powerful metaphors and linguistic and structural innovations. This playwright was Joan Ure (aka Elizabeth Clark nee Carswell).

Joan Ure challenged in her plays patriarchal preconceptions by stepping away from a naturalistically-based linear narrative and focusing on the positionality of the feminine in her plays such as *Something in it for Cordelia* (1971), *Something in it for Ophelia* (1971) or *Take your old rib back, then* (1979). It remains unclear what exactly stirred a strong response from amongst the ranks of critics and practitioners, her irreverent use of classical texts as a starting point, or the fact that this was a woman writer breaking taboos and removing her female characters from the domestic/marginal sphere making them central protagonists of her dramas. Somehow it always seemed that Ure's writing was before her time, and her experimentation with different styles, such as lyricism of movement, surreal settings, her experimentation with lyrical styles in dramatic language, and her feminist themes were often met with suspicion and disparagement. In reality, Ure was never censorious of or adverse to men in her plays, she merely sought

to explore the nature of human identity and relationships on all levels, in order to expose the falseness of the clichés of femininity firmly entrenched in both social and literary context. She was a proactive figure in theatre circles in Scotland, and was, together with Ada F. Kay and Ena Lamont Stewart, involved in the formation of the Scottish Society of Playwrights in 1973. Ure felt that despite the presence of a number of women playwrights, Scottish theatre was still largely dominated by men. In an interview with John McGroarty at the Traverse in May 1993¹, she reflected Helene Cixous' remark that going to the theatre was like witnessing her own funeral. Ure was not alone in her interest in gender and social politics, many Scottish women playwrights have investigated the themes of social responsibility and the contradiction between one's individual desires and social obligations in their roles as wives, mothers and daughters. The canonised perception that family was seen as woman's greatest achievement was rejected by Ure as sacrificial, oppressive and barren. Sue Glover (1943-) was going to comment on this perception in her play *The Seal Wife* (1980), through her character Rona:

RONA. Babies don't stop you being on your own. They grow up and away and fend for themselves².

With the appearance of Sue Glover in the early 1980s, after she had spent most of the previous decade writing for radio, the idea slowly began to crystallize about opening a school of women playwrights. Soon the foundation of Edinburgh Playwrights Workshop followed marking the 1980s, in the eyes of some, as a sort of a renaissance period of women's playwriting tradition in Scottish drama. It was in this decade that 7: 84 Scotland revived Lamont Stewart's *Men Should Weep*, and the need to give voice to unspoken histories of women and re-tell history from a female viewpoint gave rise to appearance of significant women playwrights such as Liz Lochhead (1947-), Marcella Evaristi (1953-), Ann Marie di Mambro (1950-), Sharman Macdonald (1951-), Rona Munro (1959-), Anne Downie, and Aileen Ritchie. This dream of a unified school or tradition of female playwriting in Scotland never implied any singularity of style and content. On the contrary, the strength was always in their plurality, expressing the whole range of different experiences and preoccupations. Firmly rooted in

1. Reproduced in J. McGroarty, «Interview with Joan Ure», *Theatre Scotland*, 2, 1993, p. 25.
2. S. Glover, *The Seal Wife* (unpublished manuscript), 1980, p. 52.

socialist tradition, these plays dealt with pertinent social issues, they created revisionist histories by questioning the well-trodden Burnsian, Scottesque, tartan-clad image of Scotland's past, and they set out on a search for Scotland's identity, its position and function in modern world. They explored these themes from female perspective, having as their main aim not only probing into what it means to be Scottish, but more distinctly, into what it means to be white, Scottish, female and working-class. In some cases, men were removed from the stage to enable female voices to tell their own stories. Often these stories were told through non-linear structure and poetic language, going back to historical tales and oral tradition of storytelling, the authors would include dreamlike, chimerical, fairytale elements, repetition and fragmentation to show the women's dislocation from modern world. In terms of style, for example, Liz Lochhead, Marcella Evaristi, Rona Munro, Fiona Knowles (the so-called The MsFits) and Morag Fullerton began their work in theatre by using the genre of revue. Writers such as Lochhead and Jackie Kaye explored the relationship between poetry and drama, such as in dramatised readings of their collections and specially devised work, and Glover and Munro used folk tales as the starting point and inspiration for their deconstruction of traditional female types such as maiden, strumpet, mother and hag.

Sue Glover had her stage debut in 1980, when Tom Galla-cher, then writer-in-residence at the Royal Lyceum Theatre, commissioned her to write her first full-length play, *The Seal Wife*, for the Little Lyceum. From the outset, her playwriting has been heavily influenced by Scottish storytelling tradition and Scottish landscapes. Glover has always placed emphasis on the language, infusing her plays with strong mythic, chimerical elements, and using folkloric and historical elements to tell women's stories and to deconstruct clichés imposed by the rigid patriarchal structures. In her plays Glover is always concerned with the protagonists who live on the margin of the society, and who are uncomfortable in their own skin. In *The Seal Wife* (1980), she employs the Nordic legend of the selkies, the seal-people, to give strong criticism of women's position being only seen through her domestic situation. Rona, the young seal wife, is uncomfortable in her role as a wife and a mother, and her final rejection of her family is a strong metaphor for nature vs. nurture concept, the final myth/reality paradox between who

these protagonists are and what they are seen to be by the society in which they live. Glover continues to explore the theme of marginalisation in *An Island in Largo* (1980) which was first produced by the Byre Theatre, St Andrews in 1981. The play, inspired by Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe* dissects Selkirk's emotional and physical alienation from his social environment. The establishment – the Church, medical science or politicians, and in some cases even the community itself – is always seen as an oppressive force with a crippling effect on one's sense of self, the theme that Glover further investigates in *The Bubble Boy* (1981), *The Straw Chair* (1988), *Bondagers* (1991) and *Sacred Hearts* (1994). Mixing history and mythologies, Glover offers a powerful criticism against the double standards of patriarchal society where the feminine is always seen as the other, the inferior, the chaotic and the godless, something that needs to be subdued and tightly controlled. In *Bondagers* and *Sacred Hearts* in particular, female body becomes an epitome for the land itself, and the universal issues of the exploitation of land and Scotland's struggle to define her own national identity are explored through intimate stories portraying the plights of female field-workers in the Borders in the 18th century, and Lyons' prostitutes in 1975 respectively. In *Bondagers* Glover goes one step further by inventing the language these characters speak based on long forgotten 18th century Lallans. She herself is quick to remind that the language she uses in this play is a folkloric concoction, and not a real language in any sense. It is through this use of folkloric/mythic elements in her plays that Glover raises her female protagonists to a mythological level where their personal identities become a strong metaphor for national identity.

Another playwright who explores different possibilities of use of Scots language, and the concepts of nature vs. nurture and personal vs. national identity from a distinctive feminist perspective, is Liz Lochhead. In the original version of her first full-length play *Blood and Ice* (1980), inspired by Mary Shelley's life and work, Lochhead weaves a non-linear, stream-of-consciousness narrative on the subject of nature vs. nurture and the «monstrosity» of women's biological and artistic creation. Unfortunately, while the original 1980 version was a powerful re-telling, or rather a reconstruction of a history from a female point of view, the revised version produced at Royal

Lyceum, Edinburgh, in 2003, witnessed the author's attempt to return to some form of linearity and historical contextualisation. By doing so, the play lost a distinctly feminine perspective that was at the core of the original piece. This begs a question whether the return to linearity reflects a direction in which Lochhead's creative development is heading at the moment, or perhaps it is a statement pertaining to the positionality of feminist thought in the 21st century? Does it mark the change of direction of formal and linguistic experimentation that was a landmark of so much dramatic production by women in the 1970s and 1980s? Or is it just a coincidence? Perhaps it is too early to judge, and one will only be able to reflect upon this after a substantial body of critique has been created about the most recent generation of women playwrights in Scotland, whose work appeared at the dusk of the 20th century. Most critics still seem to consider *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* (1987) to be Lochhead's most perfect creation, presenting a revisionist view of historical characters of Mary and Elizabeth, the former becoming a representative of kingless, powerless Scotland, dethroned and beheaded in the face of the growing force that would become the British Empire. In this play, she, without a shadow of a doubt created one of the greatest mythical characters of Scottish theatre, La Corbie, a folkloric symbol of Scotland, a cawing crow or a scalloped female bard, presaging the country's past, present and future in a profoundly sardonic voice. The play's first production, by Communicado Theatre Company at the Royal Lyceum Theatre in August 1987, emphasised this by setting the play in a circus ring, taking in such a way her interest in deconstruction of histories, and creating emotional distance between the beholders and the «beheld». Still, in terms of her exploration of female identity, *Blood and Ice*, and *Dracula* (1985) remain her most distinctive achievements. The visual metaphor of «sisterhood», the deconstruction of virgin/strumpet, chalk/cheese dichotomy as clichés by which women are seen through the male gaze, is discreetly underplayed though still omnipresent in *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* in the characters of Mary/Mairn and Elizabeth/Leezie. This metaphor is far more overtly presented in the earlier two plays with the direct parallels being drawn between the characters of Mary and her half-sister Claire in *Blood and Ice*, and the Westerman sisters, Mina and Lucy in *Dracula*.

Gender and national politics always go hand in hand, and it was in the 1980s that some playwrights began to explore the lives of minorities living in Scotland. Two major Scottish-Italian authors came from the west coast of Scotland in that period, Marcella Evaristi and Ann-Marie di Mambro, each with their own unique experiences. Marcella Silvia Evaristi's first play *Dorothy and the Bitch* opened to great acclaim at Demarco Gallery, Edinburgh in 1976, followed by a number of successful plays exploring the lives of Italo-Scottish women such as *Scotia's Darlings* (1978), *Hard to Get* (1980), *Wedding Belles and Green Grasses* (1981), *Eve Set the Balls of Corruption Rolling* (1982) and *Commedia* (1982). She became known as the first to focus on the Italo-Scottish theme for the Scottish stage, and her earlier plays were inspired by her childhood experiences of growing up in the suburbs of Glasgow, bringing in the strong theme of female rite of passage and budding sexuality. In the latter play, *Commedia*, which premiered at the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield in 1982, she explored another taboo, the relationship between a middle-aged widow and a young man. Though thematically progressive for the time when they were written, Evaristi's plays never reached the linguistic potency and structural complexity of her early revue *Mouthpieces*, which explores the gender and class relationships in a series of humorous sketches. Ann Marie di Mambro use of Italo-Scottish theme is much more understated and she looks at the gender issues in the framework of a more general context of modern urban life. Her plays such as *Joe* (1987), *Visible Differences* (1988), *The Letter-Box* (1989) and *Tally's Blood* (1990) repeatedly deal with the lives of women in small urban communities, and the inadequacies of these communities to understand and protect women's needs. Her plays are much more somber than Evaristi's, lacking the latter's ability to laugh at the life's gravest conditions; they are also less scatological and poetically more powerful, laden with rich multi-layered images.

Another playwright of that period who, similarly to Evaristi, experimented with coming-to-age comedy and scatological humour was Sharman Macdonald. In her plays such as *When I Was a Girl I Used to Scream and Shout* (1984), *When We Were Women* (1988) and *The Winter Guest* (1993) the concept of sisterhood is continuously reiterated, and, like Lochhead in *Dracula*, Macdonald turns this concept on its head. Her female protagonists live in the fatherless world, dislocated from their

families and their pasts. They are successful and independent, and emotionally and spiritually emptied shells, with the need to go back and recapture the childhood time of innocence in order to understand who they are. This theme of displacement and the need to re-capture past would also be touched upon in Anne Downie's stage adaptation of Jessie Kesson's *The White Bird Passes* (1986) and Aileen Ritchie's plays *Shang-a-Lang* (1986) and *Asking For It* (1989). Rona Munro (1959-) also explores coming-to-age theme in her plays such as *Fugue* (1983) where the sexual frustrations and fear of dying turns a teenage protagonist into a pathological sufferer of the fugue (a walking illness), *Saturday At the Commodore* (1989) where she explores a protagonist's budding lesbian desires in a small northeast Scottish rural community, and *Bold Girls* (1990) which focuses on the battle between reality and illusion, loyalty and betrayal, against the backdrop of Northern Irish troubles. Interestingly, men are physically absent from all three of these plays, as they are from Glover's *Bondagers*, but they are nevertheless constantly referred to as absent brothers, fathers and lovers who, through their very absence, make demands on women in this distinctly man's world. In her play *Piper's Cave*, commissioned by Paines Plough Theatre Company in 1985, Munro uses a folk tale about the pied piper as a starting point for a tale about men's violence against women, similarly to *The Maiden Stone* (1995) where the Scottish tale of the devil and the maiden was used to explore the lives and choices of several generations of women in the harsh rural landscape of northeast Scotland, epitomised in the fate of the play's main protagonist, an early 19th century actress Harriet, and her family. *The Maiden Stone* is a story about choices, or the lack of them, that women are forced to make in the world, a powerful refusal of a cliché that denies women a possibility to be seen as anything other than wives and mothers, the theme that is recurrent, overtly or otherwise, in the works of all of the so far mentioned female authors.

Some of these authors continued to write for the stage throughout the 1990s, such as Liz Lochhead, who gained further prominence with her adaptations of Moliere's comedies and well-known Greek classics such as *The Greeks* (2000), *Medea* (2000), and *Thebans* (2003). Her original work, sadly, continues to suffer from increased use of linear narrative style, thematic and stylistic preoccupation with popular soap opera

such as *Britannia Rules* (1998), *Perfect Days* (1998) and, most recently, *Good Things* (2004). A 39-year-old-desperate-to-conceive Glasgow hairdresser Barbs from *Perfect Days*, and *Good Things*' Susan, a 49 year-old lovelorn charity-shop keeper, are far removed from the mythical protagonists of her earlier plays. Others, like Evaristi, Downie or Ritchie moved into radio or film, making less regular appearances on stage such as Evaristi's 2003 fantasy musical *Nightflights* at Dundee Repertory Theatre, Downie's *Parking Lot in Pittsburgh* (2002) at Byre Theatre, St Andrews and Ritchie's *The Juju Girl*, across-time saga of self-discovery in central Africa produced by Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh in 1999. Furthermore, some, such as Evaristi and Macdonald chose to leave Scotland and relocate to London for personal and career reasons, the decision that would subsequently affect the nature and style of their later output. In the 1990s they were joined by other female voices including Linda McLean (1952-), Catherine Lucy Czerkawska (1959-), Nicola McCartney (1972-), Lara Jane Bunting (1969), Grace Barnes, Louise Ironside, Isabel Wright, and Zinnie Harris (1973-).

In the 1990s the themes and preoccupations changed and diversified, reflecting the current changes in Scottish society. In the 1980s Scotland was looking outside for new definitions of nationhood and its positionality in the United Kingdom and larger international community. Accordingly, the plays written in this period reflected the plagues of contemporary society, from more personal issues such as the women's plight to escape traditional roles, to larger social issues such as precariousness of economic market, disintegrating families, violence and racism. The tone was the one of negative positivism, expressing doubts but also hope that future may still bring change, and, as Peter Zenzinger argued in his article «The New Wave» in *Scottish Theatre Since the Seventies* (1996, p. 136),

an encouraging, pervasive sense of challenge and high energy, and a commitment to the crucial problems Scottish society faces at the approach of the new millennium [...].

From the mid-1990s onwards Scotland seemed to have turned inwardly again to explore the nature of its society and its peculiarities. Scotland's face was fast changing in terms of migration and economy, and the position of women was changing too, resulting in the women turning their attention to

issues other than feminist struggle for equality and recognition. This is not to say that writing by women playwrights in Scotland at the turn of the 20th century lost its political ardour, quite the contrary. However, as the meaning of «political» and «politics» altered, so the women playwrights began to transform, and further fragment, a theme of personal politics, and explore possible meanings and relevance of the concepts of «identity» and «community» in the 21st century.

For example, intricacies of family relationships in the chaos of modern world have been explored in the work by Catherine Czerkawska, who returned to stage, after having replaced her early 1980 theatre debut of Royal Lyceum Theatre's production of *Heroes and Others* with a decade of writing for radio and television, with *Wormwood* (1997), a story about a family torn by Chernobyl disaster, and *Quartz* (2000), a play about solitude and religious devotion. Domestic violence and father-daughter relationship is portrayed with chilling accuracy in Linda McLean's *One Good Beating*, which premiered in Traverse Theatre as part of the triple bill in 1998, and fragility of human life and need for others is explored in her 1999 play *Riddance*, which delineates a childhood memories of two men and a woman in a Glasgow tenement, and in her version of Laura Rouhonen's *Olga* (2001), a tender story about friendship between an 85 year old woman and a eighteen year old «Ned³».

Experimentations with Scots language continued in the plays such as Linda McLean's *Word for Word* (2003), produced by Magnetic North at Traverse Theatre, about three generations of women in one family, who pass down stories that contain hidden truths. Much of the play's central conflict comes from McLean's use of rhythm of language, repetitions and the lack of understanding between Scots speaking women and English speaking cameraman who comes to film them. In her review of the 2003 production, «The Scots have a word for it» in *Evening News*⁴ Andrea Mullaney affirmed that *Word for Word* «posits that words have power and that in losing our native tongue we could be losing much more⁵» Isabel Wright, another up and coming playwright, tries her hand at contemporary urban Scots in her Scots translation of François Archambault's play *15 Seconds*, produced by Traverse Theatre in 2003. Similarly, political issues are being re-visited and old wounds are now being moved to the new territories, such as in Linda McCartney's *Heritage*

3. Scottish colloquial term for a teenage hoodlum.

4. A. Mullaney, «The Scots have a word for it», *Evening News*, 20 March 2003.

5. *Idem*.

(1998), where Northern Irish conflict goes transatlantic to affect the lives of teenagers in 1914 Canada.

Social issues are being explored by a number of women playwrights in the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, they seem to have been running out of steam, and the women playwrights are increasingly turning towards romantic plays depicting lives of single women in the contemporary urban society. Grace Barnes's attempt to write a romantic murder mystery, *Lavender Blue* (2002) which was produced by Stellar Quines at Royal Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh, resulted in an uneven play with two-dimensional characters. Barnes is better known as a founder of The Skeklers Theatre Company in 1999, which continues, under her artistic direction, to develop theatre on Shetland, while balancing this mostly community-based work with touring to London's West End. Barnes herself indicated the specific problems of making theatre in an environment which is not traditionally theatrical in her «Notebook» published in *Scotland on Sunday* on Sunday 22 September 2002, where she explains that professional theatre in Shetland is limited to mainland theatre companies touring one or two shows a year at the Garrison Theatre in Lerwick. Not since the Communicado's tour in 1980s had a show toured to any of the more remote areas, and many of the audience would therefore be «made up of non-theatre goers or people who had only ever experienced amateur drama – a hugely popular pastime in Shetland⁶». For that reason, Barnes and her company are committed to creating a specific kind of drama that would be a fusion of poems, traditional folk music, dance and strong visual images. For example, Barnes's play *Circles and Tides* (2002) draws inspiration from the local history, and is created to appeal to the audiences of all ages. In *Circles and Tides*, for example, the poems were written in dialect by local author Laureen Johnson.

The rationale behind using local artists is political as well as artistic, Barnes is well aware of the fears raised over the last few years about the Shetland dialect dying out, particularly amongst the younger generation. The Skeklers Theatre Company, therefore, produces more than mere entertainment for the local community, their work is also educational as it advocates the use of the old dialect amongst the teenagers.

Amongst other women playwrights who write about topical issues one should mention Isabel Wright, Kate Atkinson and

6. G. Barnes, «Notebook», *Scotland on Sunday*, 22 September, 2003.

Viven Adam. Wright is another talented writer who has sprung out of Traverse Theatre's playwriting workshops. After the earlier success of her work with Boilerhouse, with *Blooded* (2001) and *Initiate* (2001), and with Frantic Assembly's 2002 production of *Peepshow*, her dramatic critique of medical trials in Scotland, *Mr Placebo* (2003), produced by Traverse, suffered from various structural problems, verbosity and weak characterisation. It seems that ever-decreasing rehearsal periods are partly to blame, the playwrights are sometimes required to complete their plays in the timeline that is unpracticable to them which can result in staging plays that are a couple of drafts short of a final version. Kate Atkinson and Vivien Adam's work can perhaps be most accurately described as a hybrid between melodrama and television soap opera, and Adam has indeed latterly moved into television, first working as a storyliner for *High Road*, and later as a script associate, producer and series producer for Channel 5's series *Family Affairs*. The trend towards working for radio and television continues proportionately to the number of stage plays written by both men and women who would stylistically and topically be better placed in television medium. Still, there are several women playwrights whose vivacious theatrical vision stands out above the rest. Amongst them are Lara Jane Bunting, Louise Ironside and Zinnie Harris, all three offering their very different theatrical visions written in their unique styles.

Lara Jane Bunting first started writing for theatre after winning the Scottish Young Playwright award in 1987 and 1988. Her plays such as *Vodka and Daisies* (1989), *Love but Her* (1990) and *My Piece of Foreign Sky* (1996) are slice-of-local-life stories in which she explores the themes such as coming-of-age in small Scottish west coast urban environments, friendship, love, machismo, homosexuality, provincial bigotry and thwarted expectations. In many ways, her writing is reminiscent of Lamont Stewart's or Glover's plays with a similar sense of social responsibility and poetic license. In her most accomplished play so far, *My Piece of Foreign Sky*, she depicts the life of a mining family in Catrine, Ayrshire, and the effects of redundancy on the main protagonist's relationships with her son and husband. Bunting's portrayal of a middle-aged woman who lives through her son, wishing him to fulfill the dreams that she never could is all too real, reflecting the lives of women in small mining communities. A piece of sky from the title

becomes a metaphor for woman's aspirations and hopes for an inner space that would be hers alone. While most authors of her time place their female characters outside domestic sphere, Bunting subverts it by having men invade it. Nell and Sanny's relationship is threatened when Sanny loses job, in a similar way that the Morrisons' relationship in Lamont Stewart's *Men Should Weep* deteriorates when John becomes unemployed. Bunting juxtaposes Nell with the character of Ellen, a young woman Nell's son Lex is engaged to, who seems to be perfectly happy to stay at home and who lacks ambition or expectations that would go beyond the dreams of marriage and family. Ellen's character, like her author, belongs to post-feminist generation who feels that the feminist struggles from earlier period are something that are a thing of the past, and who live in quite a different world, with different view of reality.

Louise Ironside's writing stands on the other side of a scale from Bunting's, as a much starker, bolder, politically louder voice. Her 1993 play *Risk*, commissioned by Lung Ha is the result of a devised process of working with disabled actors on creating powerful visual images and characters who, though readily recognisable in everyday life, are far from being mere clichés. The impetus for writing *Risk* was the 1988 legislation by the then Conservative government concerning entitlement to Income Support for young people. This move, which cut entitlement to basic Income Support for sixteen and seventeen year olds proved to have a devastating effect on a generation of young people with no, or hardly any, job prospects. The remit of *Risk*, commissioned by The Grassmarket Project, was to explore the topic of young people at risk and highlight certain areas of personal experience of the project's participants, such as physical and sexual abuse, underage prostitution, crime and homelessness. This resulted in a script, by Ironside, that focused on five young beggars in order to show risks of being young, poor and homeless in 1990s Edinburgh. The piece that Ironside created was neither judgmental nor sentimental in its style and content but sought to give voice to, in Ironside's own words, «some of the young people who have found themselves at the very bottom of our *Classless Society*⁷ ». Her other piece, also written in collaboration with Lung Ha Theatre Company and John Mitchell, *The Home Made Child* (1997) was inspired by the story of Bluebeard, and bears more than accidental resemblance to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The play is written

7. L. Ironside, Note to *Risk* manuscript (unpublished), 1993.

as a series of visual images, a sort of a fragmented fairy-tale with more than ever relevant issue of ethics of medical science at its core.

Zinnie Harris's work is probably most poetic out of the three, and also most intimate. Originally trained as a director, Harris is also most multi-faceted of all playwrights discussed here, she has worked as director for Royal Court before moving to Edinburgh to work with Traverse. She also collaborated on projects with Edinburgh's Theatre Workshop, including directing *Self-Service* by Ksenija Horvat and Zee Sulleyman for the 1999 Fringe. Her plays include *By Many Wounds* (1998), *Gravity* (2000), the award winning *Further Than a Furthest Thing* (2000), *Nightingale and Chase* (2001), and *Midwinter* (2004). *Further Than the Furthest Thing* is an inspired story about a closely-knit community living on an isolated island similar to Tristan da Cunha who are eventually forced by an erupting volcano to sail away to Southampton, and it includes some of the most striking images ever written for the Scottish stage in recent years. In an interview for *The Guardian* on 6 July 2002, she admits that she was encouraged in her efforts by Irina Brown, who directed the original production:

When I was working with Irina Brown on «Further...». I had a scene where the stage direction was «A naked, pregnant woman emerges from the sea.» If you think about that on stage you can see that this is quite a tall order. But at no point in the development process did she ask, «How do you think I can stage this? Can't you make it simpler?». She simply encouraged me to write the play I wanted⁸.

Benedict Nightingale wrote in *The Times* on 8 August 2000 that Harris manages to introduce «genuine magic into the dramatic equation without loss of plausibility⁹». For her 2001 play *Nightingale and Chase*, Harris spent some time preparing in a prison, which makes her story hauntingly real. *Nightingale and Chase* is a play about a young mother getting out of jail and being met by her middle-aged partner, structurally it consist of three consecutive monologues written in a colloquial language. The play, premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in October 2001, had a lukewarm reception with the critics. Her next play, *Midwinter* (2004) is a soul-searching play about a woman who, at the end of war, takes custody of a dumbstruck boy, and the trouble that this act causes when her husband returns home from war. While *Further Than the Furthest Thing*

8. Quoted from «An Interview with Zinnie Harris», *The Guardian*, 6 July, 2002.

9. B. Nightingale, «Further than the furthest Thing», *The Times*, 8 August 2000.

returns home from war. While *Further Than the Furthest Thing* and *Nightingale and Chase* deal with the sense of displacement and coming to terms with a loss, *Midwinter* is a play about the ways in which people can form new identities, new histories for the future.

The last three decades of theatre production in Scotland have brought to attention a number of successful women playwrights, however, the work of many still remains an uncharted territory. The reason for this is partly that much work, even if performed once, often remains unpublished and buried in the depths of theatres' archives. Sarah Jones argues in her article «Women creating a scene» that «the prominence of female playwrights is a recent phenomenon¹⁰». Her take is that many women only started having their voices heard in the Scottish theatre world in the early 1980s. However, this is only partly true. Scottish theatre has always known the work of exceptional women writers, and many a work has been performed on the stages throughout Scotland. Proportionally less represented than male authors in theatre, women traditionally preferred to write for radio and television, where their work was more readily commissioned. It is also true that more traditional theatres choose to programme classics rather than new writing, and new writing Scottish theatre houses like Traverse Theatre are few and far between. There is a hint that this tide might change in the future, with Mark Thomson's mission to bring new writing onto the stage of Royal Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh. The recent staging of Lochhead's revised play *Blood and Ice* is an indication that women's writing may be gaining new incentive in recent years. To expect that statistically a number of female versus male playwrights will even out in the future is unrealistic, however, Scottish theatre should celebrate the voices of female authors who have contributed to its development throughout modern history. Only few names of these fine artists have been mentioned here, there are many more whose voices are yet to be acknowledged.

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