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## Scotch Missed: Play for Today and Scotland

Jonathan Murray

### Abstract

This article explores Scotland's relationship with and contribution to the Play for Today series. In order to quantify these, it proposes a working definition of 'Scottishness' based on representational content. This generates a body of 21 Scottish Plays for Today, which the article further breaks down into two sub-sets: seven plays produced outside Scotland and fourteen within. Noting that the externally-produced plays are far better remembered and much more easily accessible than their locally-produced peers, the article asks: do the external plays alone offer a reliable synecdoche for the terms of Scotland's contribution to Play for Today and the images and understandings of Scotland that Play for Today created and/or confirmed? Through extended comparative textual analysis of two externally-produced plays – *Just Another Saturday* and *The Elephants' Graveyard* – and two locally-produced ones – *Degree of Uncertainty* and *The Good Time Girls* – the article demonstrates that the answer to this question is in the negative. The analyses presented here highlight the extent to which the 1970s work of writer Peter McDougall is far more formally and tonally complex than its contemporary popular and critical reputations might suggest. They also highlight the existence of an extended engagement with feminist gender politics and identities within Scottish screen fiction from an earlier date than conventionally identified within the established scholarly consensus. In these ways, the article addresses multiple aspects of Scottish screen and cultural studies' long-term neglect of television's position and significance within modern Scottish culture and cultural history.

**Keywords:** Play for Today; Scotland; television drama; Peter McDougall; *Just Another Saturday*; *The Elephants' Graveyard*; *Degree of Uncertainty*; *The Good Time Girls*.

### Introduction

In a recent essay, John Hill (2020) highlights Play for Today's 'effort to extend dramatic representation beyond England'. The discussion that follows explores one aspect of the striving that Hill identifies, namely, the fact that Scottish-themed and/or-produced works constituted a numerically significant and chronologically consistent thread through the series'

history, appearing at numerous points between its first season (*Orkney*, 13 May 1971) and its last (*It Could Happen to Anybody*, 14 August 1984). The following arguments therefore look to establish a basis for an expanded understanding of Scotland's creative, cultural and ideological significance for Play for Today and of Play for Today's creative, cultural and ideological significance for Scotland.

Before beginning that task, two significant challenges – one general, one taxonomical – should be acknowledged. With important individual exceptions (see, for example, Petrie 2004; Cook 2008), academic study of post-World War Two Scottish culture has mostly overlooked the significance or impact of television drama (Murray 2018). Unlike cinema, which has been consistently explored since the early 1980s (McArthur 1982) and the subject of seven monograph-length studies this century alone (Petrie 2000; Petrie 2004; Martin-Jones 2009; Murray 2011; Meir 2015; Murray 2015; Nowlan and Finch 2015), television drama remains a 'critically neglected' (Petrie 2004: 208) tradition of modern Scottish cultural production and consumption. Material difficulties, such as the fact that much early Scottish television drama is either missing or difficult to access, have contributed to this neglect. In other regards, however, it is as critically perplexing as it is unfortunate. Indigenous television drama production has a substantially longer history than its cinematic counterpart and the televisual corpus available for study is much larger than its cinematic counterpart, thus 'offer[ing] a more encouraging example of a viable mass for critical discussion than cinema' (Blain 2009: 773). Yet the long-term evolution of modern Scottish cultural studies tells a different story. Because detailed scholarly groundwork is absent, the current essay explores the terms and significance of the relationship between Scotland and Play for Today largely through extended textual analyses of a small sample of individual Scottish-themed and/or -produced works.

The second challenge to note is a taxonomical one. In *Degree of Uncertainty* (6 March 1979), one of the works discussed below, the central character begins a university seminar presentation by cautioning that ‘we must be more than vigilant in the matter of defining terms’. This point applies to this essay’s project and, before interrogating the relationship between Play for Today and Scotland, the numerical boundaries of the texts that make up this relationship must first be established. One potential approach involves tracing individual career trajectories of Scottish televisual practitioners within a UK-wide institutional ecosystem and tracing a relationship of symbiotic influence between them and it (Caughie 1986; Petrie 2018). Such an approach understands the putative ‘Scottishness’ of any given Play for Today as encompassing the birth or adoptive nationality of one or more key creative personnel and results in a corpus of roughly 50 Plays, including non-Scottish-themed contributions from writers such as John McGrath and Alan Sharp, producers such as Margaret Matheson, and directors such as Moira Armstrong, John Mackenzie, James MacTaggart and Gavin Millar. One benefit of such an approach is that it would respond productively to much Scottish screen studies work’s tendency to overlook the outputs and career trajectories of Scottish practitioners when the former take those figures outside of Scotland’s boundaries, representationally, industrially and/or institutionally speaking (Murray 2011: 131-207; Murray 2015: 177-8).

However, given the near-total lack of extended analysis of television drama images of Scotland specifically, this essay adopts a different taxonomical approach. The following arguments apply a working definition of national origin based on representational content. This approach identifies a corpus of 21 Scottish Plays for Today, one that is then split into two discrete sub-sections. The first comprises seven plays that were Scottish-themed and/or -authored, but London-produced: *Orkney*; *Just Your Luck* (4 December 1972); *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (6 June 1974); *Just Another Saturday* (13 March 1975); *The*

*Elephants' Graveyard* (12 October 1976); *Donal and Sally* (14 November 1978); *Just a Boys' Game* (8 November 1979). The second comprises fourteen plays that were Scottish-themed and produced by BBC Scotland: *The Bevellers* (21 November 1974); *Clay, Smeddum and Greenden* (24 February 1976); *Willie Rough* (9 March 1976); *Charades* (13 December 1977); *The Thin Edge of the Wedge* (20 December 1977); *Ploughman's Share* (27 February 1979); *Degree of Uncertainty*; *The Slab Boys* (6 December 1979); *A Gift from Nessus* (28 February 1980); *The Good Time Girls* (7 April 1981); *The Silly Season* (9 February 1982); *Eve Set the Balls of Corruption Rolling* (30 March 1982); *Aliens* (30 November 1982); *It Could Happen to Anybody*.

While modern Scottish cultural studies has discussed cinema far more than television drama, two influential truisms that have emerged from those debates are worth testing in relation to the analysis of the Scottish Plays for Today. The first truism is that the most culturally pervasive screen images of Scotland have, historically speaking, been those produced outside of Scotland itself (McArthur 1982; Michie 1986). Initial consideration of the Scottish Plays for Today seems to demonstrate that rule in action. The externally-produced texts have consistently enjoyed significantly greater levels of contemporaneous attention than their locally produced counterparts. One initial factor in the creation of this imbalance was that many of the London-produced plays – such as those of Peter McDougall – were high-budget, all-film productions, whereas their Scottish-produced counterparts conformed to the more standard production constraints of the time, being mostly shot in the studio, on video and for visibly lower production budgets. Differential levels of implied cultural prestige at the point of original production and transmission were further embedded by the fact that all of the London-produced Scottish Plays for Today benefited from a repeat screening following their original broadcast. Indeed, one, *Just a Boys' Game*, has been rebroadcast on the BBC's ancillary channels three times (once on BBC4, twice on BBC

Scotland) since October 2020. In contrast, none of the Scottish-produced Plays for Today have ever been repeated. Five of the seven externally-produced Scottish plays are (or were) commercially available on DVD, and two (*The Elephants' Graveyard* and *Just a Boys' Game*) were reissued on Blu-ray in 2021 as part of a two-volume anthology produced by the British Film Institute to mark Play for Today's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. In sharp contrast, none of the BBC Scotland-produced plays has ever been made commercially available. Most of the externally-produced plays have also (unlike any of their BBC Scotland-produced counterparts) been subject to other significant forms of popular cultural memorialisation over the past decade or so. The Edinburgh International Film Festival staged a 2009 retrospective of writer Peter McDougall and director John MacKenzie's television work (including *Just Your Luck*, *Just Another Saturday*, *The Elephants' Graveyard* and *Just a Boys' Game*) and a 2014 one of writer John McGrath's (including *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*). McGrath's and McDougall's Plays for Today also featured prominently in the two-season 2012-13 BBC Scotland documentary series, *Watching Ourselves: 60 Years of Television in Scotland*. Similarly, it is only the externally-produced plays that enjoy any sustained visibility within Scottish screen studies. John Cook (2008: 112) identifies Peter McDougall as 'probably... the most significant dedicated television playwright to have emerged from Scotland' and McDougall and McGrath are discussed within the two most influential monographs on Scottish film and television (Petrie 2000; Petrie 2004), whereas none of the BBC Scotland-produced plays feature in either text.

The marked imbalance in levels of collective attention, admiration and recollection accorded to the externally and locally-produced Scottish Plays for Today steers discussion towards the second Scottish screen studies' truism worth testing in relation to these works. If the first truism proposes that externally-produced images of Scotland have nearly always exerted cultural, ideological and industrial dominance over their locally-produced

counterparts, the second relates to the perceived consequence of that dominance. Successive generations of Scottish screen artists and screen works are, it is claimed, recurrently compelled to inhabit and negotiate a national representational terrain that has been pre-emptively and comprehensively landscaped by numerous external actors and factors past and present. Thus, in what was perhaps the first significant piece of modern Scottish television drama scholarship, John Caughie (1982: 114) argued that:

It seems likely that there is a certain pressure on Scottish television producers to privilege the image of Scotland that is nationally marketable... Scottish television looks for financial and prestigious approval to London and the independent network. The marketable image is construed as the one which confirms rather than challenges the dominant discourses of Scottishness.

Articulated during the period of *Play for Today*'s production, this argument is worth testing in relation to the Scottish plays. The present article asks: Does it matter that only the externally-produced plays are remembered and revisited to any significant degree, whereas their locally produced counterparts remain forgotten and inaccessible? Does the external plays' representational content offer a reliable synecdoche for both the terms of Scotland's contribution to *Play for Today* and the images and understandings of Scotland that *Play for Today* created and/or confirmed? Do the local plays indeed 'privilege' certain 'nationally marketable dominant discourses' already articulated by their better-known external peers? Or would an attempt to bring the local plays back into critical light create an expanded understanding of this area of British and Scottish television histories?

Answers to those questions are developed through extended textual analysis of four Scottish Plays for Today: two externally produced (*Just Another Saturday*; *The Elephants' Graveyard*) and two locally produced (*Degree of Uncertainty*; *The Good Time Girls*). On that basis, this article argues that the historical forgetting of the locally-produced Scottish plays is

a matter of significant critical and cultural historical regret. Despite their notable formal and ideological interest, the externally-produced Plays alone do *not* offer a reliable synecdoche for the terms of the wider relationship between Scotland and Play for Today. The sharply contrasting gender politics of the four plays discussed below make that clear even before other considerations are taken into account. Taken individually or as a collective, the locally-produced plays frequently articulate different discourses of ‘Scotland’ and ‘Scottishness’ from those associated with their externally-produced peers. A comprehensively balanced critical account of British and Scottish television histories therefore needs to find space to discuss the locally-produced works at proper length.

That said, it is important to acknowledge that this article’s choice of comparative case-studies aims to identify how the London- and Scottish-produced plays constitute distinct historical sources of national-representational discourse and debate, rather than to one-sidedly lionise or prioritise one set of plays at the other’s expense. If gender politics constitute the main axis of difference apparent within the comparative analyses that follow, different dividing-lines would become apparent had a different sub-set of London- and Scottish-produced plays been discussed instead. Moreover, even though the essay’s early-twenty-first-century perspective sympathises more with the two Scottish-produced plays’ gender politics, its arguments are far more concerned to establish that diverse forms of critical value and interest are attached to *all* of the Scottish Plays for Today, regardless of their production base.

### *Just Another Saturday*

Greenock-born screenwriter Peter McDougall’s television debut, his 1972 Play for Today *Just Your Luck*, established many of the signature formal, tonal and thematic qualities of his subsequent screen practice: a demotic linguistic and philosophical eloquence that often tends



towards fatalistic gallows humour; a distinctive mixing of naturalist and absurdist elements in its depiction of contemporary working-class greater Glasgow life and culture (Archibald 2021); and a determinedly existentialist world-view that speaks with a strong local accent while simultaneously spiking what it sees as its native culture's construction and conservation of a sense of collective identity predicated on self-destructive, because unyieldingly deterministic, social values, rituals and practices. McDougall once presented his memories of childhood and young adult life in Greenock (in an interview with *The Scotsman*, 20 March 1989) as defined by the fact that his parents 'meant no harm [but...] they wanted to keep me trapped in their wee sphere, protected from the outside world'. It is suffocating motivations and claustrophobic situations of this kind that appear regularly across his television work.

Accordingly, the pre-opening credits of McDougall's second Play for Today, *Just Another Saturday*, waste no time in proposing the thesis that contemporary working-class greater Glaswegian culture brands its inhabitants in indelible and defacing ways. A montage sequence alternates between external medium and long shots of deserted nocturnal Glasgow and interior close-ups of the Protestant Loyalist paraphernalia that decorates-cum-dominates the bedroom of seventeen-year-old John (Jon Morrison), the work's central character. Tellingly, the only image the montage repeats is one of a sectarian tattoo on John's right forearm: ambient bigotry written into the individual physical body. Similarly, the first words another character addresses to him are: 'What's the matter... are you sick?' The succeeding narrative takes a 'day in the life' form. John rises, talks with his parents, leaves home to act as mace thrower for an Orange Order marching band, witnesses and is drawn into various violent incidents during and after the march, returns home, talks with his parents again and goes to bed. The conspicuously circular character of this narrative arc is deliberate: *Just Another Saturday* presents one day in John's adolescent life in order to ask whether the future course of his adult one is already prefigured within this 24-hour period's events.

But despite refusing to flinch from deeply critical acts of local socio-cultural commentary, *Just Another Saturday*'s answer to that question is optimistic. In *Just Your Luck*, all characters lack the capacity or courage to acknowledge or challenge their domestic cultural environment's dysfunctional nature. But in *Just Another Saturday*, numerous primary and secondary protagonists do just that. Anonymous passers-by fleetingly mock John's Orange march as 'one of yer fancy dress parades', while John's father, Dan (Bill Henderson), is afforded significant space to outline a quasi-Marxist diagnosis of Scottish sectarian organisations as the opium (or, perhaps better, tonic wine) of the masses, 'keep[ing] the people split... instead of battering together for something better for themselves'.

Another key difference between *Just Your Luck* and *Just Another Saturday* is that the former was largely studio-bound and shot on video, whereas the latter was shot on location and film. That material difference produces an important thematic corollary. *Just Another Saturday*'s multiple and notably lengthy documentary-drama montages of central Glasgow overwhelmed by Orange marchers oscillate between moments that are both gregarious (cross-gender and cross-generational groups socialising) and grotesque (senior Orangemen peddling arcane constitutional paranoia). Read narrowly, the showcasing of such sequences, with their internal tonal contrasts, is intended to connote the nascent and conditional nature of John's relationship to Loyalism: he does not necessarily like all that he sees. A more comprehensive analysis, however, understands *Just Another Saturday* to be itself captured by the location-based marching sequences' complex allure even as the work itself consciously sets out to illustrate Loyalism's complex appeal for John. Quoted in a review of the play in the *Financial Times*, 19 March 1975, director John MacKenzie argued that 'when you look at the beautiful banners, hear the liberated sound of the bands, you feel that the parade is a festival, a sort of Mardi Gras'. Like John within it, *Just Another Saturday* is ultimately incapable of either celebrating or castigating this contemporary working-class Scottish culture in absolute

terms. On one hand, John and his creators are unmoved by the Orange Order's fetishising of a bogus concept of local cultural identity and legacy. But on the other, both are palpably pulled towards the exuberant demotic energy that working-class Loyalism simultaneously feeds and feeds on.

*Just Another Saturday* tries to resolve such tensions by privileging the idea of an existential, not ideological, route to adult self-actualisation for John. In the penultimate scene, Dan explicitly acknowledges the Clydeside-as-cultural-cul-de-sac phenomenon that the comparable parental protagonists in *Just Your Luck* exemplify but deny: 'Yer mither and me'll mould yer life for you: you make yer ain'. But Dan is the work's most inconsistently handled protagonist: he constitutes a locus of apparent respect at some points but obvious regret at others. While he is easily the most historically and politically aware character, his achievement is constructed as pyrrhic. Dan is seen to have unmanned himself, both literally and figuratively speaking. His wife Lizzie (Eileen McCallum) ('a big lassie'), drinking pal, Joe (Phil McCall) ('no' as young as he used tae be') and son ('hiding behind yer wee bit o' philosophy... I'm sorry for you') all verbally emasculate him. So, too, does the work itself: understanding all too well how the world acts upon him and others of his native class, Dan is understood, and understands himself ('Ah'm feart'), to have lost the ability to act authentically within – or on – the world. Despite seeing that failure to leave home will spiritually stunt his son, he nonetheless tries to compel John to bide on anyway: '[If] you leave... that's [your mother] really finished with me'. Equal parts disgusted and disappointed, John reacts by committing to fly the nest and make his own way in the world post-haste.

*Just Another Saturday* presents John's decision as intrinsically existential and unreservedly supports it for that reason. This perspective is crystallised within an aesthetically overdetermined end credits sequence. An upbeat, rock guitar-led extradiegetic instrumental soundtracks an establishing shot of John tossing the Orange marching band

mace; the image's low-angle, medium-to-close-shot framing entails that only clear blue sky is visible around him. Slow-motion close-ups of the mace rising and falling through clear air, occasionally interspersed with John's outstretched tossing or catching arm, then proceed for fully two minutes. This ending is affectively as well as aesthetically powerful precisely because it enables multiple audience readings. One such is sceptical and aligns with Duncan Petrie's argument (2004: 28) that 'McDougall's protagonists are... limited as social actors, young men trapped in a kind of "eternal adolescence"'. In such a reading, John's future identity and prospects remain, like the rising and falling mace, very much up in the air. Despite John's youthful best intentions, the play concedes the possibility that he may end up internalising Lizzie's parochial view, as self-limiting as it is self-congratulatory, that, 'there's naewhere like hame and nane like yer ain'. Alternatively, however, the reading the present writer favours sees the end credits' audiovisual form as constituting a much more bullishly optimistic authorial statement on both the character's and MacKenzie's shared part, involving an assertion that John's potential will bloom only if and when he makes a decisive choice to separate (whether physically and/or psychologically) from his domestic socio-cultural milieu. This is why the airborne mace ends the work visually untethered from everything and everyone that previously surrounded it. The text's recourse to bravura stylisation within its final images is an enforced one. Nothing more formally discreet or conventional could suffice in connoting the quasi-evangelical conviction that drives its existential belief in both John's unique masculine human potential and the specific life choices necessary – and entirely achievable – in order to fulfil it.

## *The Elephants' Graveyard*

*Just Another Saturday*'s climax sees a social observational thematic agenda supplanted by a spiritual one. This evolving line of authorial preference is further developed within *The Elephants' Graveyard*. This opens with a sequence of medium and long shots framing a lone man's walk towards the bare hills surrounding Greenock, the latter being constructed as an unprepossessing assemblage of housing schemes, tower blocks, shipyards and factories. A close-up introduces the man, Bunny (Jon Morrison), as the work's central character. Bunny looks back on the industrial sprawl from which he has ascended; the play's title and writer's credit appear; a panning shot tracks Bunny's route as he turns his back on urban congestion and his face toward rural isolation. The popular belief that the natural world offers refuge – 'another world is conjured, a world beyond work, a world of other possibilities' (Archibald 2021) – from the modern one is immediately invoked.

By its end, however, *The Elephants' Graveyard* constructs two distinct 'escape into nature' narratives. Alongside the literal one, an existential-cum-supernatural counterpart is hinted at throughout, then stated explicitly in the final scene. Bunny's hike sees him cross paths with Jody (Billy Connolly), a stranger roughly twice his age (the older man states that he is 'staring at 40'). Both men admit that they have lied to their respective wives about having jobs and are thus forced to wander the hills in order to preserve that fiction. They then spend their day together walking, talking, playing, and drinking. Jody tells Bunny that he doesn't 'like tae see young boys wasting themselves' and tries to induct him into a vernacular existentialism similar to that which dominated *Just Another Saturday*'s latter stages: 'We've never even been in [the game...] been shown the rules but we've never really been shown the beauty of [it]'. This homily, the stated motivation behind it, and the multiple similarities between the two men's lives belatedly take on new meaning. Jody strongly implies that he is Bunny's future self before vanishing into thin air; confounded and deserted, Bunny descends

back to Greenock alone. In this way, the character of *The Elephants' Graveyard's* second 'escape into nature' narrative belatedly becomes clear. The most important form of nature into which Jody encourages Bunny to escape is in fact the young man's own. An ostensibly naturalistic, two-hand Socratic dialogue reveals itself to have been a disguised soliloquy: a single protagonist talking to, through and about himself while simultaneously trying to determine how best to live out his enhanced self-knowledge in practice.

For these reasons, *The Elephants' Graveyard* is Peter McDougall's most formally experimental screen work. Jody's warning that intelligence can prove a burden, not a blessing – 'the patter and quick crack... stop ye thinking about anything' – can be read as his creator cautioning himself about the possible limitations of the ensemble comedy-drama format that his previous Plays for Today had swiftly mastered (Petrie 2004: 24). The consequent analytical challenge involves balancing acknowledgement of *The Elephants' Graveyard's* formal and intellectual ambition with awareness of the complex tapestry of thematic possibilities *and* pitfalls which that ambition weaves.

For example, *The Elephants' Graveyard* adopts a fable-like ambience with elegant subtlety. The work serially situates itself – through its title, central character's name and Jody's admiring reference to Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* – as part of a venerable fictional tradition employing zoomorphic protagonists and narratives for morally instructive ends. Yet attaining the fable's timeless quality precludes *The Elephants' Graveyard* from extended engagement with topical alternatives – a fact that the work itself freely acknowledges. The auditory manner of Jody's narrative introduction (heard whistling 'Flower of Scotland' before coming into full view) does not situate the play within a particular place and time. Rather, it ingeniously implies the story-to-unfold's concealed doppelgänger premise. Bunny and Jody are both about to experience the song lyrics' famous question – 'When will we see your like again?' – initially answered, then climactically re-posed in fantastical fashion.

Similarly, Jody's prescription for the liberation of contemporary Scottish working-class men owes everything to solipsism and nothing to socialism. His dismissal of 'big union men' who 'think they can articulate fur the boys' crystallises McDougall's preference for individual self-determination over collective organisation. While Jody's valedictory exhortation ('when we a' start tae share and feel... then we'll start moving again') *seems* communitarian it is in fact profoundly individualistic. The 'we' in question is the royal one: in addressing Bunny, Jody in effect talks to and about himself. In so brilliantly engineering an opportunity for an authorial world-view to explore and articulate itself in philosophically distilled, narratively uninterrupted fashion – 'a play of ideas... allowing for an upfront explicit exchange on a range of philosophical and political concerns' (Archibald 2021) – the play simultaneously becomes a far more tenuous – or, at very least, far less obvious – portrait of contemporary working-class urban Scotland than McDougall's other Plays for Today. The social determinism Jody rails against ('ye get neither chance nor choice... leave school... straight tae work... then ye get marrit ... then spend the rest of yer days using both as an excuse for never having done anything with your life') is a condition that is universal rather than, as in McDougall's other plays, in some significant part locally specific or inflected.

The speed with which McDougall's existentialism sidelined the other thematic interests visible in his first three Plays for Today directly impacted on his work's evolving gender politics in problematic ways. *Just Your Luck*'s close, if not noticeably sympathetic, attention to female experience becomes a markedly secondary consideration in *Just Another Saturday* before being fully removed from *The Elephants' Graveyard*. The only value Bunny and Jody see in work is that the experience of industry offers diurnal respite from that of domesticity. Men's honesty with and between themselves is a deeply serious matter; men's dishonesty with women is a source of offhanded amusement. *The Elephants' Graveyard* marks the point

at which its author's existentialism became fully and permanently homosocial in both content and expression.

That fact explains why this play goes so far as to introduce not 'homoerotic' (Archibald 2021) but *parthenogenetic* elements into its account of Bunny's possible (re)birth as a result of meeting Jody. While *The Elephants' Graveyard* assumes a 'one day in the life' form at story level, at that of symbol it articulates instead the concept of 'one life in the day'. Trying to hide when he first encounters Jody, Bunny falls down a long slope. The slow-motion, exaggerated point-of-view perspective that marks the shots depicting this event has no stylistic equivalent elsewhere in the work; moreover, it creates the strong impression of movement resulting from physical expulsion rather than accidental fall. Although it can only become fully apparent once the narrative ends, the consequent implication is that encountering Jody precipitates a neo-natal event for Bunny. Subsequent scenes then suggest the idea of a temporally condensed process of single-sex parenting from which feminine input and influence are absent. Jody bottle-feeds Bunny (albeit with tonic wine, not milk); baptises him (the end of a rough-and-tumble game sees Bunny fall into a pool); plays physical games with him; spins make-believe for his educative benefit (the parable about American settlers that he conjures from the simple sight of a pond); counsels him to live a fuller life than his elders; and, ultimately, withdraws his presence and influence, thus challenging Bunny to make his own way in the world. It is no accident that the juncture at which Bunny remembers witnessing his biological father's death is also that at which Jody declares their time together to be closing. Femininity is not simply invisible within this narrative world and world-view: it is rendered irrelevant to them, a fact ideologically problematic even if ingeniously achieved. It is also an approach very different from that employed within the BBC Scotland-produced Plays for Today to which this article now turns.



## *Degree of Uncertainty*

*Degree of Uncertainty*'s title puns on the higher education setting of Alma Cullen's play but also flags the work's articulation of a highly sceptical, socially informed world-view at odds with the romantic masculine existentialism of a writer like Peter McDougall. What *Degree of Uncertainty* does share with McDougall's work, however, is the construction of its world-view in intensely gendered terms via its embodiment in the figure of a central protagonist. Josie (Jennie Linden), a late-thirtysomething divorcee, striving to raise a young family while completing a history degree and subsisting on a precarious combination of student grant, maintenance from her ex, and her stepmother May's (Mary Healey) occasional charity. The situation's frustrations are exacerbated by Josie's failure to encounter significant respect within either of the social worlds she straddles. Family members young and old question the worth of a university degree, while lecturers query whether she is worthy of a university place. Josie's struggles are contrasted with, and often complicated by, those of a group of female and male fellow students of varying ages.

However, despite all this, Josie does not emerge as a clearly and consistently sympathetic point of audience identification in the way that McDougall's male protagonists in *Just Another Saturday* and *The Elephants' Graveyard* do. Her acute powers of social observation render her a victim in certain situations but a victimiser in others. Positively speaking, the experience of higher education sees Josie 'letting go' in a sense different from the accusation directed at her by her stepmother. Instead, Josie increasingly refuses to self-censor, or be censored, in calling out the individual and institutional hypocrisies she encounters at home and in class. Moreover, the text celebrates her age, patronisingly referred to as a burden by several other protagonists, as in fact an experience-based source of social and psychological insight. Where her lecturers pay lip-service to an anti-ageist accommodation of 'the mature point of view', *Degree of Uncertainty* accommodates that view with self-aware sincerity.

Nonetheless, this does not stop the play from scrutinising Josie's self-defensive claim that 'I didn't get aggressive, I got clever'. She frequently bullies those with less intellectual capital or emotional resilience, and indeed, Josie's final words see her unintentionally crystallise the terms of her earlier-expressed anxiety that 'the trouble with "the University Experience" is how you can be sure it's worked'. In the play's first university-based scene, Josie's lecturer, Ramage (Mark Burns), posits the existence of an imminent anniversary related to the 1832 Reform Act but then taunts his class for lacking the knowledge to determine whether he is deliberately misleading them. In the work's last scene, Josie uses exactly the same claim to toy with her stepmother. Seeing what others have done to her does not prevent Josie from doing the same thing to others. *Degree of Uncertainty* brings its sceptical approach and world-view to bear on its central character just as much as on the contemporary social issues and themes that it analyses through her and her situation.

Those issues and themes are threefold: the heteronormative nuclear family unit is understood to entrap its members, especially the female ones; contemporary femininity is then seen to respond to this problem by assuming intrinsically competitive, not collaborative, forms; and higher education fails to ameliorate, or even substantively acknowledge, the former social ills. Unlike McDougall's work, *Degree of Uncertainty* views domestic discontent as a substantive feminist thematic preoccupation rather than a convenient prop that legitimates the privileging of narratives of masculine escape and introspection. For this reason, the play's opening scene crosscuts between several students' comparably stifling domestic situations, rather than focusing on Josie's alone. But the terms of her visual introduction (nowhere to be seen as her children awake, then found asleep in the living room beside an open textbook) are significant. Unlike McDougall's male protagonists, Josie's attempted escape from domesticity is intermittent and imperfect. She is caught between worlds, rather than replacing the domestic with a better one: if textbooks clutter her home,

her family groceries clutter her classroom. When her estranged ex returns home penniless on the eve of Josie's finals, May claims that 'you've no choice' and Gail (Maureen Japp), Josie's eldest daughter, happily concludes that her mother's exam results 'don't matter now'. Moreover, the post-university career routes Josie identifies (teaching or social work) arguably replace the burden of domestic forms of caring responsibility with their more public equivalents.

*Degree of Uncertainty's* sceptical perspective on contemporary social issues also manifests itself as a recurring interest in showing women of all ages and backgrounds to be uncommitted, or even openly hostile, to ideas of interpersonal and political collective organisation. The very first words spoken by one female character (Josie's daughter Gail) about another (Josie) are: 'Just leave her alone'. The daughter is then regularly seen engaged in housework, but as a rolling rebuke, rather than support, to her distracted mother. Josie's response to her child's personality and actions ('Christ: did I do that?') reciprocates the lack of intra-familial sympathy. Elsewhere, a younger female student delights in her ability to seduce a significantly older student's boyfriend. May provides financial, but not moral, support ('I sometimes think you want to stay in the dirt'). An interlude of solidarity between Josie and a similarly-aged peer (who moves in temporarily after a romantic breakup) causes Gail to complain, and the solidarity is then curtailed when Josie outperforms her peer in an assessment. A female employment advisor tells Josie that 'my job is to lower the expectations of everybody'. An unnamed female student informs on Josie's surreptitious smoking in an exam hall. Finally, the play ends with an act of female charity (May provides a post-graduation retail job) met by one of contempt (Josie's mocking references to the 1832 Reform Act).

*Degree of Uncertainty's* sceptical world-view also extends to its depiction of Scottish higher education. Although Josie's father (Alex McCrindle) regrets her childhood removal

from formal education due to familial financial need, her subsequent re-entry into the system lacks a clear compensatory effect. Instead, university is flagged as a milieu that inculcates individual cynicism and about which one therefore ought to be comparably cynical: the work's first university-based scene sees Ramage proclaim 'final-term disillusionment' to be 'a healthy sign'. Murky classroom politics are presented as a microcosmic confirmation of a much wider, but equally problematic, politics of class. Josie's entitled southern English lecturers cannot comprehend the nature or consequences of her working-class Scottish background, referring to these as her 'special problems'. Ramage's airy dismissal of her as an individual ('slow to grasp new ideas or let go of old prejudices') is thus understood to be better aimed at the institution he personifies. Similarly, his graduation-day speech about a romanticised and impoverished tartan Other ('time was in Scotland when... many a man who could display a Master's scroll was content to break stones by the roadside') is blind to the fact that a woman of Josie's background and situation literally cannot afford such unworldly fantasies. Ultimately, Josie's attempt at self-becoming proves chastening for her and the audience alike. The Scottish higher education system is presented as an oppressive institution within which individual possession of socio-economic capital precludes the development of meaningful personal or political insight. Conversely, the insight that the lack of such capital generates inevitably involves understanding itself as powerless to effect significant forms of personal or wider social progression. While *Degree of Uncertainty's* social-observational project perceptively identifies and illustrates multiple topical social problems, the work's feminine scepticism sees it stop itself short of suggesting clear prescriptive remedies for these.

## *The Good Time Girls*

*Degree of Uncertainty's* commitment to detailed acts of contemporary social commentary, its special interest in topical issues that impact upon private experiences and public discourses of gender, its self-awareness regarding the complex ethical and ideological considerations invoked by the simple act of constructing a narrative around a specific kind of female central protagonist, and its ultimate caution in discerning clear routes to progressive social change within modern-day Scotland, are all qualities also exhibited by Alan Clews' play *The Good Time Girls*. Nancy's (Phyllis Logan) marriage to oil-rig worker Alec (Alexander Morton) sees the couple attain a modest level of domestic comfort and disposable income. The same holds true for Ella (Anne Kristen) and Hughie (Derek Anders), the couple's neighbours and close friends. But material and marital security prove different things. When their husbands are offshore, Ella and Nancy have serial flings with men they meet in local nightclubs. Nancy's motivation is linked to Alec's spousal failings: it is implied that he, too, has a second sexual life and he spends his time at home drinking and avoiding intimacy. Matters deteriorate further when Nancy meets and falls in love with Tony (Benny Young), a divorcee. Ella disapproves of Nancy's desire to leave Alec, and ultimately warns him of his wife's intentions. But Nancy's departure proves abortive: Tony has been seeing another woman. After a night of soul-searching, she returns to clean up the now-empty marital home that Alec has trashed before deserting.

*The Good Time Girls* immediately emphasises its claim to topicality: an opening sequence of documentary stock footage of oil-rig work is followed by a scene of Alec finishing an offshore stint. The play is then equally quick to nuance its initial claim to contemporary relevance. A shot of Alec contemplating his grimy reflection in a mirror is match edited with one of Nancy contemplating her glammed-up one as she prepares for a night out with Ella. The most frequent colour of the various domestic accoutrements that she and Ella are then

seen using or donning is oil-like black. This, along with the close-ups of both women removing their wedding rings before heading out, suggests *The Good Time Girls*' primary interest is less in new forms of Scottish industry and more in the new forms of Scottish domesticity for which the new industries inadvertently create the social conditions. The play's version of modern Scotland is one in which various forms of quotidian productive and reproductive human activity (Alec and Hughie's jobs; Nancy's unpaid housework; Hughie and Ella's soldier son's imminent tour of duty in Northern Ireland; Alec, Nancy and Ella's sexual liaisons) assume far more tenuous relationships with the physical and psychological space of the family home than was the case for previous working-class and lower-middle-class generations.

But the new socio-sexual possibilities arising from this phenomenon are presented as far more ambiguous and provisional than Tony's confident masculine gloss on them – 'no ties, no worries, no responsibilities' – suggests. An offshore working life provides increased disposable income but damages Alec and Nancy's ability to maintain emotional intimacy. He, however, refuses to return to less well-paid employment and the cash-strapped state of 'bloody managing'. The idea of modern marriage as a transactional arrangement in which profit trumps passion is also suggested by the fact that Tony is re-training as an accountant after leaving his wife, and by Hughie's first act within the narrative: newly home from a work trip, he presents Ella with a roll of banknotes and promises that 'this is just for starters'. Elsewhere, Nancy and Ella's neo-feminist solidarity (early scenes show them taking more pleasure in each other's company than that of the men they seduce) proves unsustainable. Despite her serial somethings for the weekend, Ella proves unbending in her defence of marriage as a social institution. When Nancy decides to leave Alec for Tony, Ella protests 'ye can't: it's *wrong*'. Except for Nancy, then, the main characters' ostensibly modern morality-cum-sexuality is a form of clandestine, neo-bourgeois personal indulgence, not a

principled public challenge to capitalist heteronormativity: a storm in a teacup rather than a storming of the barricades.

Despite this, however, *The Good Time Girls* displays varying degrees of sympathy towards all of its central protagonists, not just towards Nancy alone. This quality stems from the play's belief that the contemporary existence of a national socio-sexual evolution – incremental, imperfect, often tending towards semi-visibility or invisibility – is a phenomenon as worthy of respectful attention as a more comprehensively radical and visible revolution would be. More specifically yet, the especially sympathetic narrative treatment of Ella stems from the play's awareness of the ethical complexity of representing particular kinds of contemporary human experience and identity that flinch from sustained public attention and visibility. For Nancy at the play's outset, anonymity is the precondition of the qualified form of personal liberty and non-conformity she has already claimed. Tony's idea of pillow talk, for example, involves warning her that, 'if I was your husband, I'd hammer you for this'. The consequent challenge for the play involves the question of how to supportively scrutinise Nancy's situation, identity and actions without lapsing into hostile surveillance of them. Nancy's initial wish immediately after first meeting Tony is simply, 'hope nae bugger sees us'. She then nonetheless repeatedly and increasingly becomes an isolated human object of intrusive attention at multiple narrative junctures: Alec's suspicious phone calls home, the prurient teenage boys who watch her change clothes in her car, her erstwhile friend Ella's curtain-twitching and eventual informing of Alec. On the eve of a tour of duty, Ella and Hughie's soldier son, Jim (James Morrison) depicts Northern Ireland as a dangerously aberrant social space. It is striking – but probably no accident – that the specific terms in which Jim expresses his belief ('don't trust no bugger – *nobody*. And ye've got tae watch the lassies – *especially* the lassies') also apply to the way in which Nancy finds herself treated in seemingly safe, unexceptional, suburban Scotland.

For these reasons, *The Good Time Girls* is less a work about contemporary Scottish socio-sexual modernity and more one about socio-sexual modernity's struggle to take root within contemporary Scotland. In their different ways, Alec, Ella and Tony all prove to be more traditionally minded (and, thus, misogynistic) figures than their respective material and/or sexual aspirations and protestations suggest. Nancy discovers that the Scotland she inhabits is an unpropitious environment within which to try to live out modern socio-sexual values in public and in full. The work makes the point emphatically via the last in a series of well-known popular songs that it quotes at length on the soundtrack to various scenes. A close-up of Nancy's distraught reaction when she discovers Tony's infidelity triggers the introduction of a *female* singer performing Leonard Cohen's 'Bird on a Wire' as viewers see Nancy spend the night outdoors and alone before concluding next morning that, 'I've nowhere to go'. That musical performance then resumes in the final scene of her tidying up the living room that Alec has despoiled before departing. In this way, *The Good Time Girls* explicitly frames itself not as an unqualifiedly celebratory study of new and widespread feminine personal freedoms that result from socio-industrial modernity. Instead, the work offers a sympathetic, but carefully caveated, portrait of a woman whose symptomatic modernity lies in the fact that, as Cohen's celebrated lyric puts it, she has at least 'tried, in my own way, to be free'. Thus, Nancy's final action within the text (she is seen polishing and looking into a mirrored coffee table in her living room) could be read pessimistically (she has failed to escape the confines of her long-term domestic state), optimistically (she has, notwithstanding her romantic disappointments, achieved a significantly enhanced state of self-knowledge that bodes well for the future), or in both ways simultaneously.



## Conclusion

This article's textual analyses suggest that the externally and locally-produced Scottish Plays for Today ought to be approached and assessed as two discrete bodies of work. While it began by noting the external plays' greater contemporary visibility and accessibility, the subsequent case-studies suggest that both the external and local plays remain largely unknown textual corpuses that would both reward extended critical rediscovery and scrutiny. The external plays, for example, are ripe for further auteurist analysis. A fuller account of McDougall's work might more comprehensively trace the interweaving evolution of its signature philosophical and ideological elements between *Just Your Luck* and the writer's best-known (and first non-Play for Today) televisual work, *A Sense of Freedom* (1981). A similarly framed project might also be applied to the work of writer John McGrath, much of whose output concentrated on Scottish subject-matter following his scripts for Plays for Today *Orkney* and *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*.

As also suggested by the above analyses of two McDougall works, the pronounced formal ambition and experimentation of many of the externally-produced plays are worthy of further study (Petrie 2004: 23; Archibald 2021). While *Just Your Luck* is mostly domestic in setting and studio-bound, it is the exception that proves the rule in relation to its externally-produced peers. And, even here, an active interest in alternatives to and/or evolutions of classical naturalist and social-realist aesthetics is visible. For example, the play ends with an instance of blackly comic counterpoint. The sight of a teenage mother's self-loathing and near-catatonia while surrounded by heedlessly voluble female company is accompanied by the sound of Jim Reeves crooning 'Welcome to My World' on the radio. The rendering of diegetic music as an arch act of extra-diegetic authorial commentary then reappears in McDougall's subsequent plays. *Just A Boys' Game* pointedly opens with a scene in which a local pub band covers the Rolling Stones' 'Paint it Black' and then proceeds to construct its

violent, nocturnal final third in ways that feel consciously indebted to cinematic traditions of French poetic realism and American film noir. More ambitiously yet in both aesthetic and ideological terms, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* argues for the importance of radical forms of collective ownership and action by turning itself into a neo-Brechtian, collectively authored work of cross-platform protest and performance (Cooke 2013: 250-1).

Finally, the externally-produced plays' evolving gender politics would also reward further extended analysis. The two earliest works within this sub-corpus, *Orkney* and *Just Your Luck*, afford broadly equal prominence to the experiences and images of working-class Scottish feminine and masculine alienation. *Orkney*, a three-part portmanteau work adapted from the short fiction of Orcadian writer George Mackay Brown, opens with a narrative of a highly intelligent, articulate and non-conforming male protagonist turning to alcohol as a defence against social isolation and ostracism and closes with a chapter built around a similarly constructed female counterpart. As already noted, however, *Just Your Luck* proved an unreliable indicator of how the gender politics of Peter McDougall's scriptwriting would subsequently develop. *Just Another Saturday*, *The Elephants' Graveyard* and *Just a Boys' Game* all foreground their respective male central protagonists' alienation from domestic space, experience, identification and responsibility. The idea that contemporary urban working-class Scottish masculine identities are authentically experienced only as a state of personal isolation – and/or that such identities can be authentically depicted only by being systematically isolated from all competing representational considerations – perhaps finds its *reductio ad absurdum* in McDougall's *A Sense of Freedom*, a work that adapts notorious real-life Scottish 'hard man' Jimmy Boyle's literary autobiographical account of prolonged penal experience of solitary confinement.

With the notable exception of director Moira Armstrong's 1976 adaptation of writer Lewis Grassie Gibbon's short stories 'Clay', 'Smeddum' and 'Greenden', the BBC Scotland-

produced plays are much lower-budget and less formally experimental works than their external peers. Some – *The Bevellers* (the first BBC Scotland-produced Play for Today) and *The Slab Boys* – are wholly studio- and single set-bound, perhaps a direct consequence of their being prompt televisual adaptations of new Scottish theatrical plays rather than original works written specifically for the small screen. The local plays mostly avoid exploring alternatives to classical naturalist and social-realist aesthetic and narrative forms; when they on occasion do so, moreover, it is most often via literary or theatrical, rather than distinctively audiovisual, means. *Charades* and *Ploughman's Share*, for example, both employ multi-stranded narrative chronology, depicting the lives of the main protagonists' forebears (*Charades*) or an earlier stage in the main characters' lives (*Ploughman's Share*). Elsewhere, *The Slab Boys* foregrounds the pleasures of neo-vaudevillian performance within its single-set 'day in the life' narrative of disaffected, directionless 1950s Scottish male teenagers for whom non-conformist acts of social resistance and commentary are not so much ultimately futile as deliberately facile.

More positively, however, the local plays undertake diverse forms of social observation and commentary mostly absent from the external plays. Works like *A Gift from Nessus* (middle-managerial), *Eve Set the Balls of Corruption Rolling* (middle), and *Charades* (aristocratic upper) depict social class positions, experiences and milieus often asserted to be largely absent from the corpus of Scottish screen fiction. The complex social and individual consequences of the late-twentieth-century Scottish economy's rolling deindustrialisation is of central importance to works like *The Bevellers* and *The Silly Season*. Non-Highland rural cultures and social histories form the respective narrative bases of *Ploughman's Share* and *Aliens*.

But perhaps most significantly of all, and as already suggested by the extended textual analyses above, the local plays diverge from their external counterparts in frequently

privileging themes of Scottish female experience and identity and attempting to develop non-patriarchal local forms of gender politics and discourse. Six of the fourteen works in question – *Clay*, *Smeddum and Greenden*, *Charades*, *Degree of Uncertainty*, *The Good Time Girls*, *Eve Set the Balls of Corruption Rolling*, *It Could Happen to Anybody* – feature female central protagonists and foreground diverse forms of Scottish female identities and experiences past and present. Moreover, of the remaining eight local plays, only *Willie Rough* articulates anything approaching the kind of romantic, quasi-mythologised image of working-class masculine authenticity-cum-self-sufficiency that increasingly dominated the work of Peter McDougall.

These points feel like important ones to make because cinema's dominance within Scottish screen studies has led many scholars to conclude that the history of twentieth-century Scottish screen cultures was one in which masculine – and often hyper-masculine – images and discourses dominated and distorted the national representational terrain to the near-total exclusion of all else. Jane Sillars and Myra Macdonald (2008: 187), for example, have proposed that, in twentieth-century Scottish screen cultures, 'unstable masculine identities... have acted as rich metaphors for the dilemma of the stateless nation, haunted by anxieties about identity and a secure "place" in the world'. It is not difficult to understand how and why such conclusions might be drawn when, as late as the twentieth century's close, only three Scottish theatrical features – *Blue Black Permanent* (1992), *Stella Does Tricks* (1996) and *Ratcatcher* (1999) had been written and directed by female artists (Margaret Tait, Coky Giedroyc and Lynne Ramsay respectively). However, when the frame of scholarly reference is widened to include neglected screen traditions such as the BBC Scotland-produced Plays for Today, a range of hitherto overlooked artists and artworks begins to complicate established scholarly paradigms and conclusions. Granted, the reinsertion into British and Scottish screen canons of neglected practitioners and texts such as those

represented by the Scottish Plays for Today must not result in the emergence of more complacent critical interpretations of local film and television histories. What this article has tried to demonstrate, however, is the fact that, if conducted with care, such reinsertion can prove a productive act of historical-critical remembrance and nuancing. For that reason, all of the works discussed, whether at length or in passing, within the preceding pages very much remain Plays for Today.

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