The Theatres of John McGrath

Adrian Mitchell

Preaching the Enjoyable Revolution

SOCIALISM is alive. Theatre is alive. Socialist theatre is alive. And, in every sense except the literal one, John McGrath, whose body gave up a long, brave fight against illness in January this year, is alive and kicking – Liberal and Tory arses for choice.

I first met John when he was a lanky undergraduate at Oxford, when I interviewed him for the local paper. One of his first plays, *A Man Has Two Fathers*, was being staged and he had just written his first radio play, *The Tent*. We argued a bit and laughed a lot and the fire of his writing and character warmed my heart.

We've been friends and comrades ever since. He also became one of my heroes – and he always will be. I shall never forget my visits to John and his beloved wife Liz – actress Elizabeth MacLennan – at their flat in Edinburgh and later at the Royal Marsden Hospital. They gave me lessons in love and courage.

I think of John with the wind in his wild hair, even indoors. He was a man born for adventures, with his crackling humour and those soulful eyes and that strong deep heart and that fighting mind. Robert Louis Stevenson would have loved John and put him in his novels. He would have been great in *Kidnapped* or *Treasure Island*. Stevenson loved to write about friendship, and friendship was one of John's greatest gifts.

Speaking through essays, talks, letters, and poems, John's last book, *Naked Thoughts That Roam About*, records many of his triumphs, and his failures too. Of course he wasn't just a playwright and a poet – that would not have been enough for such a passionate all-or-nothing highwayman. He founded his own theatre companies – 7:84 in England and Scotland (7:84 to ram home the fact that seven per cent of the people in Britain own 84 per cent of its wealth).

And, of course, that led to trouble – it is trouble enough to write plays, but to direct them as well and try to organize troupes of actors and musicians on tours to the remotest (and most beautiful) corners of Britain is a task for a trio like Superman, Lenin, and Duke Ellington.

That he succeeded so often and so triumphantly on stage and television, despite cultural bureaucrats who suspected him – rightly – of preaching an enjoyable revolution, is partly because of his strong convictions and will and imagination, but also very much because of the talents and the total loyalty of his wonderful family.

John's work did not spring out of nothing. He worked in a tradition, but a tradition which was a mixture of *The Beggar's Opera*, Brecht, and above all Joan Littlewood and Gerry Raffles's Theatre Workshop. And his work will not fade into nothing: there are so many artists in theatre, TV, and movies who have learned from his work – lessons in vision and courage and imagination.

On a Sunday in May 2002 I travelled to Edinburgh for *A Good Night Out* – a celebration of John's life at the Assembly Rooms. There must have been at least 700 people packed in, almost all of whom knew or worked with him at some stage – musicians and singers of all kinds, actors of all ages, singers and dancers and poets. It was a four-hour extravaganza of John's work devised by his wife Liz and produced by his daughter Kate – a patchwork of songs, scenes from plays, poems, and film clips. It was a glorious celebration, full of laughter and tears, culminating in a ceilidh.

Even in the last months when he was confined to his bed, John carried on working. In the last weeks, he was completing *Hyper-Lynx*, a tough and topical play he wrote for Liz to act. I have seen the first act, and it is one of his most powerful, urgent, and humane

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pieces. Now *HyperLynx* is to play at the Tricycle Theatre in Kilburn, and John's *Eight Plays for England* is soon to be published by Exeter University Press.

Already we have *Naked Thoughts*. Read it if you are interested in the future of the theatre – or the future of the human race. It will inspire you. And if your interests lie more in how to make the maximum profit out of the people around you and how to keep the poor and helpless of the world in their place, this book will kick your arse.

John McGrath is one of the visionaries without whom there is no progress. He turned his back on the doubters and the snobs and made wonderful theatre for people. Read his book, see his plays, and rise to the challenges he laid down. Thank you, John, for everything.

This tribute first appeared in the Camden New Journal on 30 May 2002.

Michael Kustow

Small Audience, Big Picture

AFTER JOHN'S DEATH, I scanned my diaries for memories of our meetings. I found an entry about going up to the Highlands to see one of his productions. It was *There Is a Happy Land*, a people's history of the Highlands in songs and stories, from pre-Christianity and the clan chiefs to absentee landlords and NATO bases. I'd commissioned him to make a TV version of it for Channel 4, filming the live performance on the road in faraway villages, school halls, community centres, mixing its bold acting and gorgeous songs and dance tunes with the elating Scottish landscape, with documents of history and economics. He made this piece, as he made all his cornerstone work, for his 7:84 company – its title pointing to the fact that seven per cent of the population owned 84 per cent of the wealth.

May 1986: 'Welcome to the damp glamour of Scotland', says John. We climb a single-track windy road through muffling mist to Applecross, a strip of houses along the edge of absolutely silent, steely water. In the pub, three big, broad, ruddy chaps are sticking two bottles of Scotch into a plastic carrier before they go home to watch the World Cup, which is already coming out of the pub's television. Well, there are three members of the populace who won't be coming to see John's people's theatre.

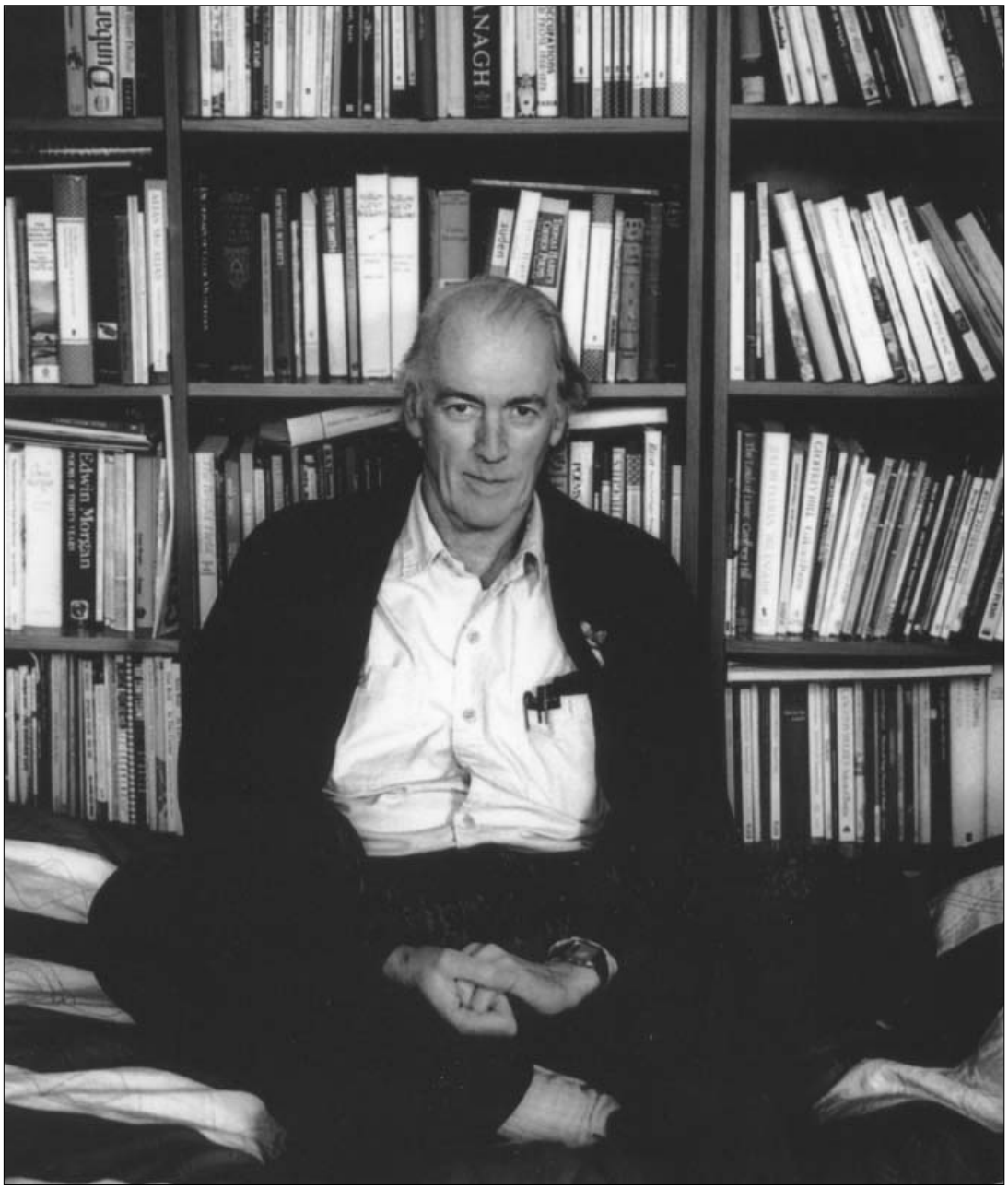
I'm wrong. They turn up at the hall, which is packed, a bit late and obviously having started in on the Scotch. They mutter loudly to each other through the show. But when the modern Gaelic songs come at the end – about being exiled in Canada and longing for home, about the rocket bases – they are the ones who know the tunes and the words. They must have taped the World Cup. So much for those who say that television is killing live theatre and people's culture. It depends how deep its roots stick.

The Funeral

It's in a crematorium in Putney. 'Why Putney?' asks John's brother-in-law, Lib Dem MP Robert MacLennan in a choked speech of welcome. 'Well, one of the ways John saw himself was as an inheritor of the Levellers in the Civil War, who held Cromwell and the New Model Army in week-long debates about the fundamentals of democracy.' But, as the two hundred-plus mourners show, John's life and work crossed borders, leaving hardly any area of our culture unaltered by his zealous and exuberant presence.

Here were Roland and Clare Muldoon, cheeky and tenacious impresarios of Hackney Empire, a people's palace of the arts, and originators in the 'sixties of the pioneering Cartoon Archetypical Slogan Theatre, a rude and raucous agitprop outfit, a joyful epitome of what Peter Brook calls 'rough theatre'. Here were actors – Jonathan Pryce, Bill Patterson, Ian Holm – for whom John wrote. Playwright Willie Russell (*Educating Rita*), director Alan Dossor, with whom John made insolent and friendly theatre at the Everyman, Liverpool, until Thatcherite arts policies cut it down to safe size and tamed scope.

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Here was Ian McGarry, general secretary of Equity, the actors' union. Here were John's fellow film and television makers – Ken Loach, who was at Oxford with John, and gave dry comic performances as an actor before driving British cinema with socialist passion; Stephen Frears, who directed *Daft as a Brush*, John's one-off TV play (where's the one-off play now?) about a Yorkshire postman who in his time off built a fantastic dream place of junk and debris; Kenneth Trodd and Tony Garnett, producers who alongside John pushed social reality and formal experiment into the genres of British television; Alexander Goehr, who got John to write the libretto for his opera about the messianic people's uprising in sixteenth-century Munster.

A Scots fiddler, one of the traditional musicians John recruited for his 7:84 Scot-

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land productions, keened us into the chapel. Adrian Mitchell, one of several poets who were touchstones for John, read a Neruda poem; later came a poem by John himself, apocalyptic visions of London after some future catastrophe, with a glint of hope about life and love despite disaster. Here, as one emblem of John's internationalism, was Renee Goddard, daughter of a Berlin Communist MP who was murdered in a concentration camp in 1940, probably set up by Stalinists. More internationalism, as we file out to the affirmative sweet sounds of Inti-Illimani.

May 1986: Tonight's performance of There Is a Happy Land *is swift, vivid, light. There's a sense of contact between the stage and the people whose story it's telling. The edge of the pipes and the swirl of the fiddles, the keening laments and lullabies and feisty jigs, the bardic visions and cheeky tales about legendary land raids – they reach out to their own audience, and could speak beyond that.*

After the show I help pack the gear into the van in the mist. Next day John and Liz, his actress wife, drive me back to Edinburgh and drive a further hour to Glasgow, where she'll perform in a benefit show for the fiftieth anniversary of the Spanish Civil War. 'All the Glasgow Stalinists will be there, of course', says Liz, 'and they'll mostly be men.' I've known John and Liz since we were all students at Oxford and Liz played Molly Bloom in an adaptation of Ulysses *which John directed, and in which I played 'stately plump Buck Mulligan'. I ask John whether he misses London, which they left five years ago to make this socialist popular theatre for, with, and from Scottish people. 'Sometimes I miss the intellectual stimulus, but you get a lot in its place: political solidarity, passion, and this kind of beauty and roots', he says, looking out at the massive hills. When we get back to Edinburgh the trees and the sky seem too small.*

Seeing Oxford contemporaries at John's funeral – the apple-cheeked comic actor who's now a judge, the darkly handsome lead actor now scraping a living as a script editor, the spiky comedian who's devoted his life to Edward Lear, the poet whose inspiration has stayed true to William Blake, the witty historian who wrote the scripts for *Morse* – it's hard to resist the usual reflections prompted by such death-shadowed reunions. How time has scraped away the flesh, or padded it out. How memory of faces is more immediate than memory of their owners' names.

But because John McGrath is the hub of our meeting, and because it's hard to imagine his long, angular, energetic body in that coffin, I have a further stab of feeling. It's not just bliss-was-it-in-that-dawn-to-be-alive reminiscence of student days. So much more seemed possible and open to us in the early 'sixties. Even before Paris and Prague 1968, it seemed that the world was up for grabs, and we had the audacity, the *chutzpah* to grab it. CND, the Algerian struggle for independence, new British cinema, and Chuck Berry. We were avid, and uncowed by world-girdling systems of crap information and false consciousness, global capital and consumerist siren songs.

John McGrath embodied this vitality in the plays he was writing and staging at Oxford. I will always regret that, because I thought I needed to sort out my personal life, I turned down John's invitation to be in Aristophanes' *The Birds*, which he made into a wild, open-air, satirical, utopian extravaganza with a fireworks climax in a college garden and music composed by Dudley Moore, who also gave a ridiculously comic performance in a bird-suit. It was an early example of the overflowing, Dionysiac, carnival spirit which, later yoked to political strategy, organization, and sheer hard work, made John McGrath a socialist artist to whom the Left should pay attention.

The Path John Opened

John began to articulate at Oxford the path he would follow as writer, director, producer, and democratic animator through theatre. In April, Nick Hern Books published *Naked Thoughts That Roam About*, a collection of his writings that traces, by means of articles, speeches, programme notes, letters, poems, memos, his work in theatre across four decades. It's the best way to follow the

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theatre imperative which was John's main highway, and a model for the way he used the small and the big screen.

As a student journalist he set out his stall, calling for the theatre to have poetry – 'because poets have been economically useless, therefore not hired by the community to pervert their true feelings' – to trust story and myth, to make music, and a new race of actors, who don't pretend that the audience isn't there:

We must wait calmly, gently, and in silence if we hope to hear the faint ticking of the heart. Silence. Gentleness. Calm. Are these theatrical qualities? When pure, they are. . . . This kind of theatre is a theatre which recognizes the realities of the global situation, and sees its position in this culture as being that of guardian of the eternal human questions, values, and despairs. It is the only non-deceptive theatre possible at this time. . . . It is necessary that it should exist, somewhere, no matter how unpopular, if what man has learnt to be good is to survive the onslaught of this anti-quated monument to evil, the Western Industrial Empire, and if we are to play any sort of meaningful role in the eternal revolution.

Between this rallying-call of fiery youth, and his 1998 speech on 'Theatre and Democracy' which was printed in NTQ 69 and rounds off John's last book ('theatre is the most thrilling and important social event ever invented by humanity'), is a continuous red line of thought and commitment. It's fuelled by the energy of connecting with audiences, angrily butting up against enemies – who gathered against 7:84 when Mrs Thatcher, who did not believe in the existence of society, collared the Arts Council, which strangled the company's grant and left John with no option but to resign. A string of plays and productions is here unwound through words and arguments, though cold print cannot evoke the texture of these shows, which encompassed social realism, variety, rock concert, ceilidh, political pageant, monologue, and carnival.

Some of this spirit lives in the para-theatrical nature of today's reclaiming the streets and facing down globalization. It may be that, just as John was inspired by the street battles of 1968 Paris ('they were theatre in the sense that they were more than themselves'), young playwright/directors are even now raising their game and quickening their desire to create a theatre up to the measure of our times. The conclusion of John's last speech should serve as a reminder of the umbilical and many-sided connection between theatre and real democracy which he came to see as the essence of his life's work.

The creation of a genuine comedy form for our times with a coherent basis in philosophy as well as a talent to entertain on a random basis, would be more possible if it were to explore the difference between authentic democracy and the state of bad-faith pseudo-democracy we live in. There are enough yawning gaps between our pretensions to social equality, equality before the law, freedom of all kinds, to motivate a million comedies. There is a need for a sharp, satirical theatre to scrutinize our values, to contest the borders of our democracy, to give a voice to the excluded, to the minorities, to guard against the tyranny of the majority, to criticize without fear, to seek true and multi-faceted information, to combat the distorting power of the mass media, to define and re-define freedom for our age, to demand the equality of all citizens for the short time we have on this earth before we die.

I haven't tried to trace here the chapters of John's career, which he made into a vocation. The book of essays, this and other memorial issues and conferences, the retrospectives and celebrations which are being organized, will provide that information, insofar as that most transient and thus innately tragic art form called theatre can be recaptured.

This article first appeared in *Red Pepper*, which rarely or ever explores theatre (or even television), to point to an artist to whom any creative and life-enhancing Left should pay attention; for in theatre, as it was practised and polemicized by John McGrath, and in the theatrical form and mode of address with which he kept his TV and film work from becoming an industrialized commodity, lies a model which the Left, in its picture of the world, in its actions and rituals and images and publications, and not least

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in its spare time, ignores to its impoverishment.

Theatre's audiences may be smaller than those of TV or film, but it is capable, as John showed in the whirlwind of his work, of offering a bigger picture – not least because less capital is needed to make a play than a movie. Nor is it just a question of paying attention to John McGrath, but of being alert to the stirrings of drama now happening.

When John died, at only 66, British television, one of the platforms he trod, had just run Paul Greengrass's film about Bloody Sunday on ITV. Channel 4 was about to show Jimmy McGovern's film about the same massacre at Derry. This rare doubleheader, an exception prompted by an anniversary, took place in a space John McGrath opened up through his television work, which sought to break the codes and conventions as he did in the theatre which was his foundation.

But why is such television of political concern and formal innovation and dramatic entertainment the exception? What are the structures that inhibit it, and where is the space for more imaginative work informed by our political, social, and personal reality that is not prompted by a news agenda?

As John died, the theatre seemed to have at least some Red blood pounding through its veins. Gregory Burke's *Gagarin Way*, a funny and acute first play about a botched attempt to kidnap an executive of a globalized company, has made its way from the Edinburgh Traverse to the National Theatre to the West End, losing a little edge in the transfer. At the Royal Shakespeare Company, David Edgar's play *The Prisoner's Dilemma*, about peace negotiations in a former Soviet republic, unfolds the ambiguities of 'conflict resolution' within the Pax Americana, though its attempts to address the RSC's bourgeois audience make its tone uncertain, and it has been shunted into the stifling Pit, the antithesis of a space for a good night out.

But as one door shuts, others open. The Arcola in Hackney, a former tailoring sweatshop, has been turned into a shabbily convivial theatre, which in the last year of John's life put on Peter Weiss's *The Marat/Sade*, Günter Grass's *The Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising*, and *Crime and Punishment in Dalston*, transposing Dostoevsky's protagonist to a young black man who murders his Turkish landlord. It wasn't just the alertness and quality of these choices that John would have cheered on; he'd have relished the sense of occasion and welcome which each event in the reclaimed Arcola, planted in a raw and mixed and alive London neighbourhood, generates.

As John wrote near the end: 'One of the great services theatre can perform for the people of any country or region or town or village is to be the instrument of authentic democracy, or at the very least to push the community as near to authentic democracy as has been achieved.'

This tribute first appeared in Red Pepper.

David Edgar

Views across Borders

EARLY ON in the first Thatcher term, one of her young Turk backbenchers announced that his mission in life was to eliminate all small touring theatre companies with the word 'red' in their title. In doing so, he acknowledged that in the 'seventies oppositional theatre had ceased to be constrained within theatre buildings (in the mid-'sixties, he'd have wanted to abolish all companies called 'English' working in theatres called 'Court').

There are a number of reasons why the wave of playwrights who emerged in the late 'sixties preferred to do it on the road. One of the most important was the abolition in 1968 of theatre censorship, which not only freed theatre from severe restraints in sexual and political content, but also allowed work that was improvised, interactive, or changed in response to events. Another was the expansion of state subsidy beyond conventional building-based companies to embrace new kinds of theatre space (notably over

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pubs, but also in arts centres and studios) and the growth of small-scale touring.

But, most importantly, there was a confluence of political and cultural factors which made the late 1960s and the early 1970s peculiarly – arguably, uniquely – favourable for the creation of a new theatre for a new audience in new places. The late 'sixties saw an unprecedented cultural emancipation of the British working class, of which the most obvious manifestations were rock music and fashion. The early 'seventies saw an equally unprecedented upsurge of industrial militancy, embracing postal workers, railwaymen, shipbuilders, car workers, dockers, and miners, culminating in the fall of the Heath Government in February 1974.

If ever there was a time for the creation of a working-class audience for popular socialist theatre, this was it. Unsurprisingly, a large number of companies emerged to try and exploit this extraordinary circumstance – some with red in the title, others celebrating industrial implements (North West Spanner) or proletarian attire (Belt and Braces). But as the 'seventies progressed and industrial militancy declined, the Labour Government elected in 1974 crumbled, existing socialism tottered, and the New Right backlash grew, it seemed that the high-water mark had been passed. The new political companies that emerged in the late 'seventies were less hostile to theatre buildings and more likely to explore the politics of identity and difference. Those who had learnt their craft in companies called Red took their experience into theatres called 'National' and 'Royal'. As in so many other areas of life, it appeared that the Great Proletarian Adventure Story was over.

Except, that is, for one company. The real omission from the Tory MP's categorization was, of course, small-scale theatre groups whose names consist of statistics (until, that is, they add a bracketed distinction between two national wings). For those of us who started making touring political theatre in the early 'seventies and moved into the conventional theatre later on, John McGrath and his companies were at first an inspiration, then a model, and then finally an ideal if not a reproach.

I saw, enjoyed, and admired *Trees in the Wind* (performed by the as-yet undivided company at the Edinburgh Festival in 1971) and *Fish in the Sea* (Liverpool Everyman, then 7:84 England, 1972–73), both of which sought to integrate personal stories with political content. By the time John moved on from that towards no-holds-barred, out-front, no-nonsense agitprop with *Lay Off* (1975), I was trying to move in the opposite direction. However, my most vivid memory of the early period of 7:84 is the impact of John's production of John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy's blistering attack on the British army in Ireland (*The Ballygombeen Bequest*), twinned with his own update of John Arden's *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*, set during the 1972 miners' strike, with the Irish troubles fulfilling the role performed in the original by nineteenth-century colonial wars.

For legal reasons, as the newspapers say, this was a highly problematic tour: but I have to say that taken together the two shows – which brought the Heath government's Irish and mainland strategies crashing together – had the greatest political influence on me. One of the many reasons that I moved away from agitprop was my realization that while the form is great at making people feel positive and optimistic, it can only convey an ersatz feeling of danger.

After I stopped writing agitprop theatre I wrote a talk (later published by *Socialist Review* and *Theatre Quarterly*[1]) which sought to outline why I thought the project to find a working-class audience for socialist theatre outside theatre buildings had waned. To do that I had to account for the success of John's work in general and *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black Black Oil* in particular. I did so by arguing that this work had appealed to an audience defined by its particular regional history rather than its class. John attacked the talk when it was first delivered, and then repeated his attack in the lectures that made up *A Good Night Out*,[2] noting (properly) that I'd only seen *The Cheviot* on television, and hadn't seen *The Game's a Bogey* (which toured to working-class urban Scotland) at all, and arguing that I was wrong to assert (in his words) that the only true forms of British

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popular culture 'are dying a lingering death in the Celtic twilight'.[3] Forms that I had indeed written off as diminished, deformed, or dead were alive and kicking, and John had put them to critical use in shows that appealed to working-class audiences in spaces they knew as effectively and in the same way as the ceilidh-plays appealed to the Highlands.

On the many occasions I met John since the 'eighties – often as a panellist at the Birmingham Theatre Conference – I've thought about that debate and tried to work out what I think about it now. Overwhelmingly, history has gone with the cultural identity model – as the organized working class suffered defeat after defeat, autochthonous forms of working-class culture continued to dwindle and degenerate, mass culture became increasingly demotic and dumbed-down, and the only place to find any progressive oppositional energy is indeed in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

But re-reading *A Good Night Out*, and the 'Popular, Populist, or Of The People' chapter in his second book of theory, *The Bone Won't Break*,[4] I realize that John's argument was more sophisticated than mine. He was seeking to analyze the relationship between the particular and the general in a way that mattered when the conjunctive between nation and class was indeed 'and'; it mattered even more when it seemed to be 'or' if not 'but'.

It was this that informed his two great historical projects, either side of his departure from 7:84. First, there was his celebration of a period in which the relationship was a given (though not uncontested in its character) in his rediscovery of a rich raft of Scottish political plays from the mid-twentieth century, presented in Glasgow between January and May 1982. The second was his huge, promenade, environmental Scottish history play *Border Warfare*, presented by John's new company Wildcat in 1989 and later broadcast on television (in order, naturally, that renegade English playwrights might see it). I think *Border Warfare* is John's best work, partly because it was most essentially a work (a chemical compound of writing, production, and performance), but mainly because it managed at the same time to celebrate and to challenge the assumptions on which that celebration is based.

I last met John with Elizabeth during the 2000 Edinburgh Festival. We ate haggis, discussed and moved on from John's health, debated the baleful effects of moral relativism on contemporary British culture, and enthused about his work developing young film directors and screenwriters through Moonstone. I thought then – and think even more now – that it's wrong to see him as a socialist writer who sacrificed what could have been a distinguished and prosperous mainstream career for his convictions. Superficially, John seemed to stick four-square in the Marxist mainstream while all around him were deviating down the enticing tributories of identity politics. But in fact John's best plays were all about the complex conflicts in the contested borderlands between religions, nations, genders, and classes (in a sense the title of *Border Warfare* could have been a fitting title for his work as a whole). They are also, in their wedding of content with a form he could only achieve through environments he created for them, the best plays he could have written.

When John began 7:84, it was true that seven per cent of the population owned 84 per cent of the wealth. As the 'seventies continued, that statistic was overtaken by the limited gains of the unionized working class, but in the 1980s the polarity returned with a vengeance and last year a Labour Prime Minister made clear that he wasn't much interested in reducing it ('never mind the gap', as the New Labour satraps have it). But however you define or categorize them (and however they define or categorize themselves), the 93 per cent are still out there.

Notes and References

1. 'Political Theatre 1968–1978', *Socialist Review*, April–May 1978, and *Theatre Quarterly*, Winter 1979.
2. John McGrath, *A Good Night Out* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 33–4, 47–8.
3. Ibid, p. 34.
4. John McGrath, *The Bone Won't Break* (London: Methuen, 1990), p. 52–75.

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